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JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY,” “OLIVE,”

&c. &c.

“ And thus he bore, without abuse,
The grand old name of Gentleman.”

TENNYSON'S “IN MEMORIAM.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER I.

IT was winter-time. All the summer-days at Enderley were gone, "like a dream when one awaketh." Of her who had been the beautiful centre of the dream, we had never heard nor spoken since.

John and I were walking together along the road towards the Mythe; we could just see the frosty sunset reflected on the windows of the Mythe House, now closed for months, the family being away. The meadows alongside, where the Avon had overflowed and frozen, were a popular skating-ground: and the road was alive with lookers-on of every class. All Norton Bury seemed abroad; and half

Norton Bury exchanged salutations with my companion, till I was amused to notice how John's acquaintance had grown.

Among the rest, there overtook us a little elderly lady, as prim and neat as an old maid, and as bright-looking as a happy matron. I saw at once who it was—Mrs. Jessop, our good doctor's new wife, and old love; whom he had lately brought home, to the great amazement and curiosity of Norton Bury.

"She seems to like you very much," I whispered; as after a cordial greeting, which John returned rather formally, she trotted on.

"They were both very kind to me in London last month, as I think I told you."

"Ay!" It was one of the few things he had mentioned about that same London journey, for he had grown into a painful habit of silence now. Yet I dreaded to break it, lest any wounds rankling beneath might thereby be made to smart once more. And our love to one another was too faithful for a little reserve to have power to influence it in any way.

We came once more upon the old lady, watching the skaters. She again spoke to John, and looked at me with her keen, kind, blue eyes.

"I think I know who your friend is, though

you do not introduce him." (John hastily performed that ceremony.) "Tom and I,"—(how funny to hear her call our old bachelor doctor, "Tom!")—"were wondering what had become of you, Mr. Halifax. Are you stronger than you were in London?"

"Was he ill in London, madam?"

"No, indeed, Phineas! Or only enough to win for me Dr. and Mrs. Jessop's great kindness."

"Which you have never come to thank us for. Never crossed our door-sill since we returned home! Does not your conscience sting you for your ingratitude?"

He coloured deeply.

"Indeed, Mrs. Jessop, it was not ingratitude."

"I know it; I believe it," she answered, with much kindness. "Tell me what it was?"

He hesitated.

"You ought to believe the warm interest we both take in you. Tell me—the plain truth."

"I will. It is that your great kindness to me in London was no reason for my intruding on you at Norton Bury. It might not be agreeable for you and Dr. Jessop to have my acquaintance here. I am a tradesman."

The little old lady's eyes brightened into

something beyond mere kindness as she looked at him.

“Mr. Halifax, I thank you for that ‘plain truth.’ Truth is always best. Now for mine. I had heard you were a tradesman; I found out for myself that you were a gentleman. I do not think the two incompatible, nor does my husband. We shall be happy to see you at our house at all times, and under all circumstances.”

She offered him her hand. John bowed over it in silence; but it was long since I had seen him look more pleased.

“Well then, you will come to-morrow evening; both of you?”

And her pleasant, friendly glance included me likewise, forcing assent.

“Are you walking further? So am I.” And we all three went on together.

I could not help watching Mrs. Jessop with some amusement. Norton Bury said she had been a poor governess all her days; but that hard life had left no shadow on the cheerful sunset of her existence now. It was a frank, bright, happy face, in spite of its wrinkles, and its somewhat hard Welch features. And it was pleasant to hear her talk, even though she talked a good deal, and in a decidedly Welch accent.

Sometimes a tone or two reminded me slightly of——Ay, it was easy to guess why John evidently liked the old lady.

“I know this road well, Mr. Halifax. Once I spent a summer here, with an old pupil, now grown-up. I am going to-day to enquire about her at the Mythe House. The Brithwoods came home yesterday.”

I was afraid to look at John. Even to me the news was startling. How I blessed Mrs. Jessop’s unnoticing garrulousness.

“I hope they will remain here some time. I have a great interest in their stay. Not on Lady Caroline’s account, though. She patronizes me very kindly; but I doubt if she ever forgets, what Tom says I am rather too proud of remembering—that I was the poor governess, Jane Cardigan.”

“Jane Cardigan!” I exclaimed.

“What, Mr. Fletcher, you know my name! And really, now I think of it, I believe I have heard yours. Not from Tom, either. It couldn’t possibly be—yes! it certainly was—Does either of you know my old pupil, Ursula March?”

The live crimson rushed madly over John’s face. Mrs. Jessop saw it; she could not

but see. At first, she looked astounded, then exceedingly grave.

I replied, "that we had had the honour of meeting Miss March last summer, at Enderley."

"Yes," the old lady continued, somewhat formally. "Now I recollect, Miss March told of the circumstance; of two gentlemen there, who were very kind to her when her father died; a Mr. Fletcher and his friend—was that Mr. Halifax?"

"It was," I answered; for John was speechless. Alas! I saw at once that all my hopes for him, all the design of my long silence on this subject, had been in vain. No, he had not forgotten her. It was not in his nature to forget.

Mrs. Jessop went on, still addressing herself to me.

"I am sure I ought, on behalf of my dear pupil, to offer you both my warmest thanks. Hers was a most trying position. She never told me of it till afterwards, poor child!" And tears stood in the kindly, blue eyes. "I am thankful her trouble was softened to her by finding that *strangers*"—(was it only my fancy that detected a slight stress on the word?)—"mere

strangers could be at once so thoughtful and so kind."

"No one could be otherwise to Miss March. Is she well? Has she recovered from her trial?"

"I hope so. Happily, few sorrows, few feelings of any kind, take lasting hold at eighteen. She is a noble girl. She did her duty, and it was no light one, to him who is gone; now her life begins anew. It is sure to be prosperous—I trust it may be very happy.—Now I must bid you both good-bye."

She stopped at the gates of the Mythe House; great iron gates, a barrier as proud and impassable as that which in these times the rich shut against the poor, the aristocrat against the plebeian. John, glancing once up at them, hurriedly moved on.

"Stay; you will come and see us, Mr. Halifax? Promise?"

"If you wish it."

"And promise, too, that, under all circumstances, you will tell me, as you did this morning, the 'plain truth?' Yes, I see you will. Good-bye."

The iron gates closed upon her, and against us. We took our silent way up the Mythe

to our favourite stile. There we leaned—still in silence, for many minutes.

“The wind is keen, Phineas ; you must be cold.”

Now I could speak to him—could ask him to tell me of his pain.

“It is so long since you have told me anything. It might do you good.”

“Nothing can do me good. Nothing but bearing it. My God ! what have I not borne ! Five whole months to be dying of thirst, and not a drop of water to cool my tongue.”

He bared his head and throat to the cutting wind—his chest heaved, his eyes seemed in a flame.

“God forgive me !—but I sometimes think I would give myself body and soul to the devil, for one glimpse of her face, one touch of her little hand.”

I made no answer. What answer could be made to such words as these ? I waited—all I could do—till the paroxysm had gone by. Then I hinted—as indeed seemed not unlikely—that he might see her soon.

“Yes, a great way off, like that cloud up there. But I want her near—close—in my home—at my heart!—Phineas,” he gasped,

“talk to me—about something else—anything. Don’t let me think, or I shall go clean mad.”

And indeed he looked so. I was terrified. So quiet as I had always seen him when we met, so steadily as he had pursued his daily duties ; and with all this underneath—this torment, conflict, despair, of a young man’s love. It must come out—better it should.

“And you have gone on working all this while?”

“I was obliged. Nothing but work kept me in my senses. Besides”—and he laughed hoarsely —“I was safest in the tan-yard. The thought of her could not come there. I was glad of it. I tried to be solely and altogether what I am—a ’prentice lad—a mere clown.”

“Nay, that was wrong.”

“Was it? Well, at last it struck me so. I thought I would be a gentleman again—just for a pretence, you know—a dream—a bit of the old dream back again. So I went to London.”

“And met the Jessops there?”

“Yes ; though I did not know she was Jane Cardigan. But I liked her ; I liked my life with them. It was like breathing a higher air, the same air that——Oh, Phineas, it was horrible to

come back to my life here—to that accursed tan-yard !”

I said nothing.

“ You see, now”—and that hard laugh smote me to the heart again—“ you see, Phineas, how wicked I am growing. You’ll have to cut my acquaintance presently.”

“ Tell me the rest—I mean, the rest of your life in London,” I said, after a pause. “ Did you hear of her ?”

“ Of course not ; though I knew she was there. I saw it in the ‘ Court Circular.’ Fancy a lady in the ‘ Court Circular’ being inquired after by a tanner’s lad ! But I wanted to look at her—any beggar might do that, you know—so I watched in streets and parks, by theatre-doors at nights, and by church-doors on Sunday mornings ; yet I never saw her once. Only think, not once for five whole months.”

“ John, how could you tell me you were happy ?”

“ I don’t know. Perhaps because of my pride ; perhaps because—Ah, don’t look so wretched ! Why did you let me say all this ? You are too good for such as I.”

Of course, I took no heed of idle words like these. I let him stand there, half-leaning, half-

crouching against the stile, now and then grasping it with his nervous, muscular hands, as if he would tear it down ; then I said, quietly—

“What do you intend to do?”

“Do? Nothing! What can I do? Though sometimes a score of wild plans rush into my mind, such as to run away to the Indies, like that young Warren Hastings, come back twenty years hence a nabob, and—marry her.”

“Marry her,” I repeated, mournfully.

“Ay, I could. That is what maddens me. If now she and I were to meet and stand together, equal man and woman, I could make her love me; I feel I could. Instead of crawling after her thus, I would go boldly in at those very gates—do you think she is there?”

He trembled, actually trembled, at the mere thought of her being so near.

“Oh, it’s hard, hard! I could despise myself. Why cannot I trust my manhood, my honest manhood that I was born with, go straight to her and tell her that I love her; that God meant her for me and me for her—true husband and true wife? Phineas, mark my words”—and, wild as his manner was, it had a certain force which sounded almost like prophecy—“if ever

Ursula March marries, she will be my wife—*my* wife !”

I could only murmur, “ Heaven grant it !”

“ But we shall never marry, neither one nor the other of us ; we shall go on apart and alone, till the next world. Perhaps she will come to me then : I may have her in my heart there.”

John looked upward : there was in the west a broad, red, frosty cloud, and just beyond it, nay, all but resting on it, the new moon—a little, wintry, soft new moon. A sight that might well have hushed the maddest storm of passion : it hushed his. He stood, still looking up, for many minutes, then closed his eyes, the lashes all wet.

“ We’ll come home now, Phineas ; I’ll not grieve thee any more ; I’ll try and be a better brother to thee for the future. Come along !”

He drew my arm in his, and we went home.

Passing the tan-yard, John proposed that we should call for my father. My poor father ! now daily growing more sour and old, and daily leaning more and more upon John, who never ceased to respect, and make every one else respect, his master. Though still ostensibly a ’prentice, he had now the business almost entirely in his hands. It was pleasant to see how

my father brightened up at his coming—how readily, when he turned homeward, he leaned upon John's strong young arm, now the support of both him and me. Thus we walked through Norton Bury streets, where everybody knew us, and indeed as it seemed to me this morning, nearly everybody greeted us—at least, one of us; but my father walked along soberly and sternly, frowning at almost every salutation John Halifax received.

“Thee art making far too many friends, John. I warn thee!”

“Not *friends*—only friendly acquaintance,” was the gentle answer, well used to turn away, daily and hourly, Abel Fletcher's wrath. But it was roused beyond control when Dr. Jessop's neat little carriage, and neatest of little wives, stopped by the curb-stone and summoned John.

“I want you and Mr. Fletcher to come to us to-morrow evening. Lady Caroline Brithwood wishes to see you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” smiled the old lady; “you, John Halifax, the hero of the people, who quelled the bread riots, and gave evidence thereupon to Mr. Pitt, in London. Nay! why didn't you tell me the wonderful story? Her ladyship is full of it.

She will torment me till she sees you—I know her ways. For my sake, you *must* come.”

Waiting no refusal, Mrs. Jessop drove on.

“What’s that?” said my father, sharply.
“John, where art thee going?”

I knew this was the first warning-gun of a battle which broke out afresh every time John appeared in any livelier garb than his favourite grey, or was suspected of any more worldly associates than our quiet selves. He always took my father’s attacks patiently—this time peculiarly so. He made no answer, but passed his hand once or twice over his brow, as if he could not see clearly.

Abel Fletcher repeated the question.

“Yes; that was Mrs. Jessop, sir.”

“I know,” grumbled my father. “The doctor is a fool in his old age. Who did she want thee to meet?”

“She!—Oh, Lady Caroline, you mean?”

“Lady Caroline wishes particularly to see John, father.”

Abel Fletcher stopped, planted his stick in the ground, released his arm from John’s, and eyed him from top to toe.

“Thee?—a woman of quality wanting to see *thee*? Young man, thee art an hypocrite!”

“ Sir !”

“ I knew it ! I foresaw how thy fine ways would end ! Going to London—crawling at the heels of grand folk—despising thy honest trade—trying to make thyself appear a gentleman !”

“ I hope I am a gentleman.”

Words could not describe my father’s horrified astonishment. “ Oh, lad !” he cried—“ a poor, misguided lad !—the Lord have mercy upon thee !”

John smiled—his mind evidently full of other things. Abel Fletcher’s anger grew.

“ And thee wants to hang on to the tail of other ‘ gentlemen,’ such as Richard Brithwood forsooth !—a fox-hunting, drinking, dicing fool !”

I was shocked ; I had not believed him so bad as that—the young ‘ squire—Miss March’s cousin.

“ Or,” pursued my father, waxing hotter and hotter, “ or a ‘ lady’ such as his wife is, the Jezebel daughter of an Ahab father !—brought up in the impious atrocities of France, and the debaucheries of Naples, where, though she keeps it close here, she abode with that vile woman whom they call Lady Hamilton.”

John started. Well he might, for even to our quiet town had come, all this winter, foul newspaper tales about Nelson and Lady Hamilton.

“Take care,” he said, in much agitation. “One taint upon a woman’s fame harms not her alone, but all connected with her. For God’s sake, sir, whether it be true or not, do not whisper in Norton Bury that Lady Caroline Brithwood is a friend of Lady Hamilton!”

“Pshaw! What is either woman to us?”

And my father climbed the steps to his own door, John following.

“Nay, young gentleman, my poor house is hardly good enough for such as thee.”

John turned, cruelly galled, but recovered himself.

“You are unjust to me, Abel Fletcher; and you yourself will think so soon. May I come in?”

My father made no answer, and I brought John in as usual. In truth, we had both more to think of than Abel Fletcher’s temporary displeasure. This strange chance—what might it imply—to what might it not lead? But no: if I judged Mrs. Jessop aright, it neither implied, nor would lead to—what I saw John’s fancy had at once sprang toward, and revelled in, madly. A lover’s fancy—a lover’s hope. Even I could see what will-o’-the-wisps they were.

But the doctor's good wife, Ursula March's wise governess, would never lure a young man with such phantoms as these. I felt sure—certain—that we should meet the Brithwoods, and no one else. Certain, even when, as we sat at our dish of tea, there came in two little dainty notes—the first invitations to worldly festivity that had ever tempted our Quaker household, and which Jael flung out of her fingers as if they had been coals from Gehenna. Notes, bidding us to a “little supper” at Dr. Jessop's, with Mr. and Lady Caroline Brithwood, of the Mythe House.

“Give them to your father, Phineas.” And John vainly tried to hide the flash of his eye—the smiles that came and went like summer lightning—“To-morrow—you see it is to-morrow.”

Poor lad! he had forgotten every worldly thing, in the hope of that to-morrow.

My father's sharp voice roused him. “Phineas, thee'lt stay at home. Tell the woman I say so.”

“And John, father?”

“John may go to ruin if he chooses. He is his own master.”

“I have been always.” And the answer came less in pride than sadness. “I might have gone to ruin years ago, but for the mercy of Heaven and your kindness. Do not let us be at warfare now.”

“All thine own fault, lad. Why cannot thee keep in thy own rank? Respect thyself. Be an honest tradesman, as I have been.”

“And as I trust always to be. But that is only my calling, not me. I—John Halifax—am just the same, whether in the tan-yard or Dr. Jessop’s drawing-room. The one position cannot degrade, nor the other elevate me. I should not ‘respect myself,’ if I believed otherwise.”

“Eh?” my father absolutely dropped his pipe in amazement. “Then thee thinkest thyself already quite a gentleman?”

“As I told you before, sir—I hope I am.”

“Fit to associate with the finest folk in the land?”

“If they desire it, certainly.”

Now Abel Fletcher, like all honest men, liked honesty. And something in John’s bold spirit, and free, bright eye, seemed to-day to strike him more than ordinarily.

“Lad, lad, thee art young. But it won’t last—no, it won’t last.”

He knocked the white ashes out of his pipe—it had been curling in brave wreaths to the very ceiling, two minutes before—and sat musing.

“But about to-morrow?” persisted John, after watching him some little time. “I could go—I could have gone, without either your knowledge or permission; but I had rather deal openly with you. You know I always do. You have been the kindest master—the truest friend to me; I hope, as long as I live, rarely to oppose, and never to deceive you.”

His manner—earnest, yet most respectful—his candid looks, under which lurked an evident anxiety and pain, might have mollified a harder man than Abel Fletcher.

“John, why dost thee want to go among those grand folk?”

“Not because they are grand folk. I have other reasons—strong reasons.”

“Be honest. Tell me thy strong reasons.”

Here was a strait.

“Why dost thee blush, young man? Is it aught thee art ashamed of?”

“Ashamed! No!”

“Is it a secret, then—the telling of which would be to thee, or to any else, dishonour?”

“Dishonour!” And the bright eye shot an indignant gleam.

“Then, tell the truth.”

“I will. I wish first to find out, for myself, whether Lady Caroline Brithwood is fitted to have under her charge, one who is young—innocent—good.”

“Has she such an one? One thee knows?”

“Yes.

“Man or woman?”

“Woman.”

My father turned, and looked John full in the eyes. Stern as that look was, I traced in it a strange compassion.

“Lad, I thought so. Thee hast found the curse of man’s life—woman.”

To my amazement, John replied not a syllable. He seemed even as if he had forgotten himself, and his own secret—thus, for what end I knew not, voluntarily betrayed—so absorbed was he in contemplating the old man. And truly, in all my life, I had never seen such a convulsion pass over my father’s face. It was like as if some one had touched and revived the

torment of a long-hidden, but never to-be-healed wound. Not till years after did I understand the full meaning of John's gaze, or why he was so patient with my father.

The torment passed—ended in violent anger.

“Out with it. Who is deluding thee? Is it a matter of wedlock, or only——”

“Stop!” John cried; his face all on fire. “The lady——”

“It is a ‘lady!’ Now I see why thee would fain be a gentleman.”

“Oh, father—how can you——”

“So thee knowest it too—I see it in thy face—Wouldst thee be led away by him a second time! But thee shall not. I'll put thee under lock and key before thee shalt ruin thyself, and disgrace thy father.”

This was hard to bear; but I believe—it was John's teaching—that one ought to bear anything, however hard, from a just and a worthy parent. And it was John himself who now grasped my hand, and whispered patience. John—who knew, what I myself, as I have said, did not learn for years, concerning my father.

“Sir, you mistake; Phineas has nothing what-

ever to do with this matter. He is altogether blameless. So am I too, if you heard all."

"Tell me all; honour is bold—shame only is silent."

"I feel no shame—an honest love is no disgrace to any man. And my confessing it harms no one. She neither knows of it nor returns it."

As he said this, slowly, gravely, quietly, John moved a step back and sat down. His face was in shadow; but the fire shone on his hands, tightly locked together, motionless as stone.

My father was deeply moved. Heaven knows what ghosts of former days came and knocked at the old man's heart. We all three sat silent for a long time. Then my father said,

"Who is she?"

"I had rather not tell you. She is above me in worldly station."

"Ah!" a sharp, fierce exclamation. "But thee would'st not humble thyself—ruin thy peace for life? Thee wouldst not marry her?"

"I would—if she had loved me. Even yet, if by any honourable means, I can rise to her level, so as to be able to win her love, marry her I will."

That brave "I will"—it seemed to carry its

own fulfilment. Its indomitable resolution struck my father with wonder—nay, with a sort of awe.

“Do as thee thinks best, and God help thee,” he said, kindly. “Mayst thee never find thy desire a curse. Fear not, lad—I will keep thy counsel.”

“I knew you would.”

The subject ceased: my father’s manner indicated that he wished it to cease. He re-lit his pipe, and puffed away, silently and sadly.

Years afterwards, when all that remained of Abel Fletcher was a green mound beside that other mound, in the Friends’ burying ground in St. Mary’s Lane, I learnt—what all Norton Bury, except myself, had long known—that my poor mother, the young, thoughtless creature, whose married life had been so unhappy and so brief—was by birth a “gentlewoman.”

CHAPTER II.

MRS. JESSOP'S drawing-room, ruddy with fire-light, glittering with delicate wax candle-light; a few women in pale-coloured gauzy dresses, a few men, sublime in blue coats, gold buttons, yellow waistcoats, and smiles—this was all I noticed of the scene, which was quite a novel scene to me.

The doctor's wife had introduced us formally to all her guests, as the custom then was, especially in these small cosy supper-parties. How they greeted us I do not now remember; no doubt, with a kind of well-bred formal surprise; but society was generally formal then. My chief recollection is of Mrs. Jessop's saying pointedly and aloud, though with a smile playing under the corners of her good little mouth—

“Mr. Halifax, it is kind of you to come;

Lady Caroline Brithwood will be delighted to make your acquaintance."

After that, everybody began to talk with extraordinary civility to Mr. Halifax.

For John, he soon took his place among them, with that modest self-possession which best becomes youth. Society's dangerous waters accordingly became smooth to him, as to a good swimmer who knows his own strength, trusts it, and struggles not.

"Mr. Brithwood and Lady Caroline will be late," I overheard the hostess say. "I think I told you that Miss March——"

But here the door was flung open and the missing guests announced. John and I were in the alcove of the window; I heard his breathing behind me, but I dared not look at or speak to him. In truth, I was scarcely calmer than he. For though, it must be clearly understood, I never was "in love" with any woman, still the reflected glamour of those Enderley days had fallen on me. It often seems now as if I too had passed the golden gate, and looked far enough into youth's Eden to be able ever after to weep with those that wept without the doors.

No—she was not there.

We both sat down. I know not if I was thankful or sorry.

I had seldom seen the 'Squire or Lady Caroline. He was a portly young man, pinched in by tight light-coloured garments. She was a lady rather past her first youth, but very handsome still, who floated about, leaving a general impression of pseudo-Greek draperies, gleaming arms and shoulders, sparkling jewellery, and equally sparkling smiles. These smiles seemed to fall just as redundantly upon the family physician, whom, by a rare favour—for so I suppose it must have been—she was honouring with a visit, as if worthy Dr. Jessop were the noblest in the land. He, poor man, was all bows, and scrapes, and pretty speeches, in the which came more than the usual amount of references to the time which had made his fortune, the day when her Majesty Queen Charlotte had done him the honour to be graciously taken ill in passing through Norton Bury. Mrs. Jessop seemed to wear her honours as hostess to an earl's daughter, very calmly indeed. She merely did the ordinary courtesies, and then went over to talk with Mr. Brithwood. In their conversation, I sought—sometimes even fancied I could catch—the name of Ursula.

So it ended—the sickening expectation which I had read in the lad’s face all day. He would not see her—perhaps it was best. Yet my heart bled when I looked at him. But such thoughts could not be indulged in now, especially as Mrs. Jessop’s quick eyes seemed often upon him or me, with an expression that I could not make out at all, save that in such a good face, owned by one whom Miss March so well loved, could lurk nothing evil or unkindly.

So I tried to turn my attention to the Brithwoods. One could not choose but look at her, this handsome Lady Caroline, whom half Norton Bury adored, the other half pursed up their lips at the mention of—but these were of the number she declined to “know.” All that she did know—all that came within her influence, were irresistibly attracted, for to please seemed a part of her nature. To-night, nearly every one present stole gradually into the circle round her; men and women alike charmed by the fascination of her ripe beauty, her lively manner, her exquisite smile and laugh.

I wondered what John thought of Lady Caroline Brithwood. She could not easily see him, even though her acute glance seemed to take in everything and everybody in the room. But on

her entrance John had drawn back a little, and our half-dozen of fellow-guests, who had been conversing with him, crept shyly out of his way ; as if, now the visible reality appeared, they were aghast at the great gulf that lay between John Halifax the tanner and the Brithwoods of the Mythe. A few even looked askance at our hostess, as though some terrible judgment must fall upon poor ignorant Mrs. Jessop, who had dared to amalgamate such opposite ranks.

So it came to pass, that while everybody gathered round the Brithwoods, John and I stood alone, and half concealed by the window.

Very soon I heard Lady Caroline's loud whisper—

“ Mrs. Jessop, my good friend, one moment. Where is your ‘*jeune héros*,’ ‘*l’homme du peuple*?’ I do not see him. Does he wear clouted shoes and woollen stockings?—Has he a broad face and turned-up nose, like your ‘*paysans Anglais*?’ ”

“ Judge for yourself, my lady—he stands at your elbow. Mr. Halifax, let me present you to Lady Caroline Brithwood.”

If Lord Luxmore's fair daughter ever looked confounded in her life, she certainly did at this minute.

“*Lui ? Mon dieu ! Lui !*” And her shrug of amazement was stopped, her half-extended hand drawn back. No, it was quite impossible to patronize John Halifax.

He bowed gravely, she made a gracious curtsy ; they met on equal terms, a lady and gentleman.

Soon her lively manner returned. She buckled on her spurs for new conquest, and left the already vanquished gentilities of Norton Bury to amuse themselves as they best might.

“I am enchanted to meet you, Mr. Halifax ; I adore ‘*le peuple*.’ Especially,”—with a sly glance at her husband, who, with Tory Dr. Jessop, was vehemently exalting Mr. Pitt and abusing the First Consul, Bonaparte, — “especially *le peuple Français*. *Comprenez-vous ?*”

“*Madame, je comprends.*”

Her ladyship looked surprised. French was then not very common among the honest trading class, or indeed any but the higher classes in England.

“But,” John continued, “I must dissent from Lady Caroline Brithwood, if she mingles the English people with ‘*le peuple Français*.’ They are a very different class of beings.”

“Ah, *ça ira, ça ira*”—she laughed, humming beneath her breath a few notes out of that terrible song. “But you know French—let us talk in that language; we shall horrify no one then.”

“I cannot speak it readily; I am chiefly self-taught.”

“The best teaching. *Mon dieu!* Truly you are made to be ‘*un héros*’—just the last touch of grace that a woman’s hand gives—had you ever a woman for your friend?—and you would be complete. But I cannot flatter—plain, blunt honesty for me. You must—you shall be—‘*l’homme du peuple*.’ Were you born such?—Who were your parents?”

I saw John hesitate; I knew how rarely he ever uttered those names written in the old Bible—how infinitely sacred they were to him. Could he blazon them out now, to gratify this woman’s idle curiosity?

“Madam,” he said, gravely, “I was introduced to you simply as John Halifax. It seems to me, that so long as I do no discredit to it, that name suffices to the world.”

“Ah—I see! I see.” But he, with his down-cast eyes, did not detect the meaning smile that just flashed in hers, then was changed into

a tone of soft sympathy. "You are right; rank is nothing—a cold, glittering marble, with no soul under. Give me the rich flesh-and-blood life of the people. *Liberté—fraternité—égalité*. I would rather be a *gamin* in Paris streets, than my brother William at Luxmore Hall."

Thus talked she, sometimes in French, sometimes in English, the young man answering little. She only threw her shining arts abroad the more; she seemed determined to please, and Nature fitted her for it. Even though she had not been an earl's daughter, Lady Caroline would have been everywhere the magic centre of any society wherein she chose to move. Not that her conversation was brilliant or deep, but she said the most frivolous things in a way that made them appear witty; and the grand art, to charm by appearing charmed, was hers in perfection. She seemed to float altogether upon and among the pleasantnesses of life; pain, either endured or inflicted, was to her an impossibility.

Thus her character struck me on this first meeting, and thus, after many years, it strikes me still. I look back upon what she appeared that evening, lovely, gay, attractive—in the zenith of her rich maturity. What her old age

was, the world knows, or thinks it knows. But Heaven may be more merciful—I cannot tell. Whatever is now said of her, I can only say, “Poor Lady Caroline!”

It must have indicated a grain of pure gold at the bottom of the gold-seeming dross, that from the first moment she saw him, she liked John Halifax.

They talked a long time. She drew him out, as a well-bred woman always can draw out a young man of sense. He looked pleased, he conversed well. Had he forgotten—No; the restless wandering of his eyes at the lightest sound in the room, told how impossible it was he should forget. Yet he comported himself bravely, and I was proud that Ursula’s kindred should see him as he was.

“Lady Caroline,”—her ladyship turned, with a slightly bored expression to her intrusive hostess—“I fear we must give up all expectation of our young friend to-night.”

“I told you so. Post-travelling is very uncertain, and the Bath roads are not good. Have you ever visited Bath, Mr. Halifax?”

“But she is surely long on the road,” pursued Mrs. Jessop, rather anxiously. “What attendants had she?”

“Her own maid, and our man Laplace. Nay, don’t be alarmed, excellent and faithful gouvernante ! I assure you your fair ex-pupil is quite safe. The furore about her has considerably abated since the heiress-hunters at Bath discovered the melancholy fact that Miss March—”

“Pardon me,” interrupted the other ; “we are among strangers. I assure you, I am quite satisfied about my dear child.”

“What a charming thing is affectionate fidelity,” observed her ladyship, turning once more to John, with a sweet, lazy dropping of the eyelids.

The young man only bowed. They resumed their conversation — at least, she did, talking volubly, satisfied with monosyllabic answers.

It was now almost supper-time—held a glorious meal at Norton Bury parties. People began to look anxiously to the door.

“Before we adjourn,” said Lady Caroline, “I must do what it will be difficult to accomplish, after supper ;” and for the first time a sharp, sarcastic tone jarred in her smooth voice. “I must introduce you especially to my husband. Mr. Brithwood ?”

“Madam.” He lounged up to her. They were a diverse pair. She, in her well-preserved

beauty, and Gallic artificial grace—he in his coarse, bloated youth, coarser and worse than the sensualism of middle age.

“Mr. Brithwood, let me introduce you to a new friend of mine.”

The 'Squire bowed, rather awkwardly ; proving the truth of what Norton Bury often whispered, that Richard Brithwood was more at home with grooms than gentlemen.

“He belongs to this your town—you must have heard of him, perhaps met him.”

“I have more than had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Brithwood, but he has doubtless forgotten it.”

“By Jove ! I have. What might your name be, sir ?”

“John Halifax.”

“What, Halifax the tanner ?”

“The same.”

“Phew !”—He began a low whistle, and turned on his heel.

John changed colour a little. Lady Caroline laughed—a thoughtless, amused laugh, with a pleasant murmur of “*Bête !*”—“*Anglais !*”—Nevertheless, she whispered her husband—

“*Mon ami*—you forget ; I have introduced you to this gentleman.”

“ Gentleman indeed ! Pooh ! rubbish ! Lady Caroline—I’m busy talking.”

“ And so are we, most pleasantly. I only called you as a matter of form, to ratify my invitation. Mr. Halifax will, I hope, dine with us next Sunday ?”

“ The devil he will !”

“ Richard—you hurt me ;” with a little scream, as she pushed his rough fingers from her arm, so soft, and round, and fair.

“ Madam, you must be crazy. The young man is a tradesman—a tanner. Not fit for *my* society.”

“ Precisely ; I invite him for my own.”

But the whispers and responses were alike unheeded by their object. For, at the doorway, entering with Mrs. Jessop, was a tall girl in deep mourning. We knew her—we both knew her—our dream at Enderley—our Nut-browne Mayde.

John was near to the door—their eyes met: She bowed—he returned it. He was very pale. For Miss March, her face and neck were all in a glow. Neither spoke, nor offered more than this passing acknowledgment, and she moved on.

She came and sat down beside me, accidentally, I believe ; but when she saw me, she held

out her hand. We exchanged a word or two—her manner was unaltered; but she spoke hurriedly, and her fingers had their old nervous twitch. She said, this meeting was to her “unexpected,” but “she was very glad to see me.”

So she sat, and I looked side-ways at her dropped eyes—her forehead with its coronet of chestnut curls. How would he bear the sight—he of whose heart mine was the mere faint echo? Yet truly an echo, repeating with cruel faithfulness every throb.

He kept his position, a little aloof from the Brithwoods, who were holding a slight altercation—though more of looks than words. John heeded them not. I was sure, though he had never looked directly towards us, that he had heard every syllable Miss March said to me.

The 'Squire called across the room, in a patronizing tone: “My good fellow—that is, a-hem! I say, young Halifax?”

“Were you addressing me, Mr. Brithwood?”

“I was. I want a quiet word or two—between ourselves.”

“Certainly.”

They stood face to face. The one seemed uncomfortable, the other was his natural self—a little graver, perhaps, as if he felt what was

coming, and gathered up his strength to meet it, knowing in whose presence he had to prove himself—what he was, and what Richard Brithwood with all his broad acres could never be—a gentleman.

Few could doubt that fact, who looked at the two young men, as all were looking now.

“On my soul, it’s awkward—I’ll call at the tan-yard and explain.”

“I had rather you would explain here.”

“Well then, though it’s a confounded unpleasant thing to say—and I really wish I had not been brought into such a position—you’ll not heed my wife’s nonsense?”

“I do not understand you.”

“Come, it’s no use running to cover in that way. Let’s be open and plain. I mean no offence. You may be a very respectable young man for aught I know, still rank is rank. Of course, Doctor Jessop asks whom he likes to his house—and, by George! I’m always civil to everybody—but really, in spite of my lady’s likings, I can’t well invite you to my table.”

“Nor could I humiliate myself by accepting any such invitation.”

He said the words distinctly, so that the whole circle might have heard, and was turning

away, when Mr. Brithwood fired up—as an angry man does in a losing game.

“Humiliate yourself! What do you mean, sir? Wouldn’t you be only too thankful to crawl into the houses of your betters, any-how, by hook or by crook? Ha! ha! I know you would. It’s always the way with you common folk, you rioters, you revolutionists. By the Lord! I wish you were all hanged.”

The young blood rose fiercely in John’s cheek, but he restrained himself. “Sir, I am neither a rioter nor a revolutionist.”

“But you are a tradesman? You used to drive Fletcher’s cart of skins.”

“I did.”

“And are you not—I remember you now—the very lad, the tanner’s lad, that once pulled us ashore from the eger—cousin March and me?”

I heard a quick exclamation beside me, and saw Ursula listening intently—I had not noticed how intently till now. Her eyes were fixed on John, waiting for his answer. It came.

“Your memory is correct; I was that lad.”

“Thank’ee for it too. Lord! what a jolly life I should have missed! You got no reward, though. You threw away the guinea I of-

ferred you; come, I'll make it twenty guineas to-morrow."

The insult was too much. "Sir, you forget that whatever we may have been, to-night we meet as equals."

"Equals!"

"As guests in the same house—most certainly for the time being, equals."

Richard Brithwood stared, literally dumb with fury. The standers-by were dumb too, though such *fracas* were then not uncommon even in drawing-rooms and in women's presence, especially with men of Mr. Brithwood's stamp. His wife seemed quite used to it. She merely shrugged her shoulders and hummed a note or two of "*Ça ira*." It irritated the husband beyond all bounds.

"Hold your tongue, my lady! What, because a 'prentice-lad once saved my life, and you choose to patronize him as you do many another vagabond, with your cursed liberty and equality, am I to have him at my table, and treat him as a gentleman? By ——, madam, never!"

He spoke savagely and loud. John was silent; he had locked his hands together convulsively; but it was easy to see that his young blood was at boiling heat, and that, did he once

slip the leash of his passions, it would go hard with Richard Brithwood.

The latter came up to him with clenched fist.

“Now, mark me, you—you vagabond!”

Ursula March crossed the room, and caught his arm, her eyes gleaming fire.

“Cousin, in my presence this gentleman shall be treated as a gentleman. He was kind to my father.”

“Curse your father!”

John’s right hand burst free; he clutched the savage by the shoulder.

“Be silent. You had better.”

Brithwood shook off the grasp, turned and struck him; that last fatal insult, which offered from man to man, in those days, could only be wiped out with blood.

John staggered. For a moment he seemed as if he would have sprung on his adversary and felled him to the ground—but—he did it not. He returned not blow for blow.

Some one whispered. “He won’t fight. He is a Quaker.”

“No!” he said, and stood erect; though he was ghastly pale, and his voice sounded hoarse and strange—“I am a Christian.”

It was a new doctrine; foreign to the prac-

tice, if familiar to the ear, of christian Norton Bury. No one answered him ; all stared at him ; one or two sheered off from him with contemptuous smiles. Then, Ursula March stretched out her friendly hand. John took it, and grew calm in a moment.

There arose a murmur of " Mr. Brithwood is going."

" Let him go !" Miss March cried ; anger still glowing in her eyes.

" Not so—it is not right. I will speak to him. May I ?" John softly unloosed her detaining hand, and went up to Mr. Brithwood. " Sir, do not leave this house—I beg ; I am leaving it. You and I shall not meet again if I can help it."

His proudly courteous voice, his absolute dignity and calmness, completely overwhelmed his blustering adversary ; who gazed open-mouthed, while John made quiet adieux to his host and those he knew. The women gathered round him—woman's instinct is usually true. Even Lady Caroline, amid a flutter of regrets, declared she did not believe there was a man in the universe who would have borne so charmingly such a " degradation."

At the word Miss March fired up. " Madam,"

she said, in her impetuous young voice, "no insult offered to a man can ever degrade him ; the only real degradation is when he degrades himself."

John, passing out at the doorway, caught her words. As he quitted the room, no crowned victor ever wore a look more joyful, more proud.

After a minute, we followed him ; the Doctor's wife and I. But now the joy and pride had both faded.

"Oh ! Mrs. Jessop, you see I was right," he murmured. "I ought not to have come here. It is a hard world for such as I. I shall never conquer it—never."

"Yes—you will." And Ursula stood by him, with crimsoned cheek and eyes no longer flashing, but fearless still.

Mrs. Jessop put her arm round the young girl. "I also think you need not dread the world, Mr. Halifax, if you always act as you did to-night ; though I grieve that things should have happened thus, if only for the sake of this my child."

"Have I done her any harm ? oh ! tell me, have I done her any harm ?"

"No !" cried Ursula, with the old impetuosity kindling anew in every feature of her noble face.

“ You have but shewed me what I shall remember all my life—that a Christian only can be a true gentleman.”

She understood him ;—he felt she did ; understood him as, if a man be understood by one woman in the world, he—and she too—is strong, safe, and happy. They grasped hands once more, and gazed unhesitatingly into each other’s eyes. All human passion for the time being set aside, these two recognized each in the other one aim, one purpose, one faith ; something higher than love, something better than happiness. It must have been a blessed moment, for both.

Mrs. Jessop did not interfere. She must herself have known what true love was, if, as gossips said, she had kept constant to our worthy doctor for thirty years. But still she was a prudent woman, not unused to the world.

“ You must go now,” she said, laying her hand gently on John’s arm.

“ I am going. But she—what will she do ?”

“ Never mind me. Jane will take care of me,” said Ursula, winding her arms round her old governess, and leaning her cheek down on Mrs. Jessop’s shoulder.

We had never seen Miss March show fondness,

that is, caressing fondness, to any one before. It revealed her in a new light; betraying the depths there were in her nature; infinite depths of softness and of love.

John watched her for a minute; a long, wild, greedy minute, then whispered hoarsely to me, "I must go."

We made a hasty adieu, and went out together, into the night—the cold, bleak night, all blast and storm.

CHAPTER III.

FOR weeks after then, we went on in our usual way ; Ursula March living within a stone's throw of us. She had left her cousins, and come to reside with Dr. Jessop and his wife.

It was a very hard trial for John.

Neither of us were again invited by Mrs. Jessop. We could not blame her ; she held a precious charge, and Norton Bury was a horrible place for gossip. Already tale after tale had gone abroad about Miss March's "ingratitude" to her relations. Already tongue after tongue had repeated, in every possible form of lying, the anecdote of "young Halifax and the 'Squire." Had it been "young Halifax and Miss March," I truly believe John could not have borne it.

As it was, though he saw her constantly, it was always by chance—a momentary glimpse at the window, or a passing acknowledgment in

the street. I knew quite well when he had thus met her — whether he mentioned it or not — knew by the wild, troubled look, which did not wear off for hours.

I watched him closely, day by day, in an agony of doubt and pain.

For, though he said nothing, a great change was creeping over “the lad,” as I still fondly called him. His strength, the glory of a young man, was going from him—he was becoming thin, weak, restless-eyed. That healthy energy and gentle composure, which had been so beautiful in him all his life through, were utterly lost.

“What am I to do with thee, David?” said I to him one evening, when he had come in, looking worse than usual—I knew why; for Ursula and her friend had just passed our house, taking their pleasant walk in the spring twilight. “Thou art very ill, I fear.”

“Not at all. There is not the least thing the matter with me. Do let me alone.”

Two minutes afterwards, he begged my pardon for those sharp-spoken words. “It was not *thee* that spoke, John,” I said.

“No, you are right, it was not I. It was a

sort of devil that lodges here :” he touched his breast. “The chamber he lives in is at times a burning hell.”

He spoke in a low tone of great anguish. What could I answer? Nothing.

We stood at the window, looking idly out. The chestnut trees in the Abbey-yard were budding green; there came that faint, sweet sound of children at play, which one hears as the days begin to lengthen.

“It is a lovely evening,” he said.

“John!” I looked him in the face. He could not palm off that kind deceit upon me. “You have heard something about her?”

“I have,” he groaned. “She is leaving Norton Bury.”

“Thank God!” I muttered.

John turned fiercely upon me—but only for a moment. “Perhaps I too ought to say, ‘Thank God.’ This could not have lasted long, or it would have made me—what I pray His mercy to save me from, or to let me die. Oh, lad, if I could only die.”

He bent down over the window-sill, crushing his forehead on his hands.

“John,” I said, in this depth of despair snatching at an equally desperate hope, “what

if, instead of keeping this silence, you were to go to her and tell her all?"

"I have thought of that: a noble thought, worthy of a poor 'prentice lad! Why, two several evenings I have been insane enough to walk to Dr. Jessop's door, which I have never entered, and—mark you well! they have never asked me to enter, since that night. But each time ere I knocked, my senses came back, and I went home—luckily having made myself neither a fool nor a knave."

There was no answer to this either. Alas! I knew as well as he did, that in the eye of the world's common sense, for a young man not twenty-one, a tradesman's apprentice, to ask the hand of a young gentlewoman, uncertain if she loved him, was most utter folly. Also, for a penniless youth to sue a lady with a fortune, even though it was (the Brithwoods took care to publish the fact) smaller than was at first supposed—would, in the eye of the world's honour, be not very much unlike knavery. There was no help—none!

"David," I groaned, "I would you had never seen her."

"Hush!—not a word like that. If you heard all I hear of her—daily—hourly—her unselfish-

ness, her energy, her generous, warm heart ! It is blessedness even to have known her. She is an angel—no, better than that, a woman ! I did not want her for a saint in a shrine—I wanted her as a help-meet, to walk with me in my daily life, to comfort me, strengthen me, make me pure and good. I could be a good man, if I had her for my wife. Now—”

He rose, and walked rapidly up and down. His looks were becoming altogether wild.

“ Come, Phineas, suppose we go to meet her up the road—as I meet her almost every day. Sometimes she merely bends and smiles, sometimes she holds out her little hand, and ‘ hopes I am quite well ! ’ And then they pass on, and I stand gaping and staring after them like an idiot. There—look—there they are now.”

Ay : walking leisurely along the other side of the road—talking and smiling to one another, in their own merry, familiar way, were Mrs. Jessop and Miss March.

They were not thinking of us, not the least. Only just ere they passed our house, Ursula turned slightly round, and looked behind ; a quiet, maidenly look, with the smile still lingering on her mouth. She saw nothing, and no one ; for

John had pulled me from the window, and placed himself out of sight. So, turning back again, she went on her way. They both disappeared.

“Now, Phineas, it is all ended.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have looked on her for the last time.”

“Nay—she is not going yet.”

“But I am—fleeing from the devil and his angels. Hurrah, Phineas lad! We’ll have a merry night. To-morrow I am away to Bristol, to set sail for America.”

He wrung my hands, with a long, loud, half-mad laugh; and then dropped heavily on a chair.

A few hours after, he was lying on my bed, struck down by the first real sickness he had ever known. It was apparently a low, aguish fever, which had been much about Norton Bury since the famine of last year. At least, so Jael said; and she was a wise doctress, and had cured many. He would have no one else to attend him—seemed terrified at the mere mention of Dr. Jessop. I opposed him not at first, for well I knew, whatever the proximate cause of his sickness might be, its root was in that mental pang which no doctors could cure. So I trusted to the blessed quiet of a sick-room—often so

healing to misery—to Jael's nursing, and his brother's love.

After a few days, we called in a physician—a stranger from Coltham—who pronounced it to be this Norton Bury fever, caught through living, as he still persisted in doing, in his old attic, in that unhealthy alley where was Sally Watkins's house. It must have been coming on, the doctor said, for a long time; but it had no doubt now reached its crisis. He would be better soon.

But he did not get better. Days slid into weeks, and still he lay there, never complaining, scarcely appearing to suffer, except from the wasting of the fever; yet when I spoke of recovery, he “turned his face unto the wall”—weary of living.

Once, when he had lain thus a whole morning, hardly speaking a word, I began to feel growing palpable, the truth which day by day I had thrust behind me as some intangible, impossible dread—that ere now, people had died of mere soul-sickness, without any bodily disease. I took up his poor hand that lay on the counterpane;—once, at Enderley, he had regretted its somewhat coarse strength: now,

Ursula's own was not thinner or whiter. He drew it back.

"Oh, Phineas, lad, don't touch me—only let me rest."

The weak, querulous voice—that awful longing for rest! What if, despite all the physician's assurances, he might be sinking, sinking—my friend, my hope, my pride, all my comfort in this life—passing from it and from me into another, where, let me call never so wildly, he could not answer me any more, nor come back to me any more.

Oh, God of mercy! if I were to be left in this world without my brother!

I had many a time thought over the leaving him, going quietly away when it should please the Giver of all breath to recall mine, falling asleep, encompassed and sustained by his love until the last; then, a burthen no longer, leaving him to work out a glorious life, whose rich web should include and bring to beautiful perfection all the poor broken threads in mine. But now, if this should be all vain, if he should go from me, not I from him—I slid down to the ground, to my knees, and the dumb cry of my agony went up to God.

How could I save him?

There was but one way ; I sprung at it ; stayed not to think if it were right or wrong, honourable or dishonourable. His life hung in the balance, and there was but one way ; besides, had I not cried unto God for help ?

I put aside the blind, and looked out of doors. For weeks I had not crossed the threshold ; I almost started to find that it was spring. Everything looked lovely in the coloured twilight ; a blackbird was singing loudly in the Abbey trees across the way ; all things were fresh and glowing, laden with the hope of the advancing year. And there he lay, on his sick-bed, dying !

All he said, as I drew the curtain back, was a faint moan—"No light ! I can't bear the light ! Do let me rest !"

In half an hour, without saying a word to human being, I was on my way to Ursula March.

She sat knitting in the summer-parlour alone. The doctor was out ; Mrs. Jessop I saw down the long garden, bonnetted and shawled, busy among her gooseberry-bushes—so we were safe.

As I have said, Ursula sat knitting, but her eyes had a soft dreaminess. My entrance had evidently startled her, and driven some sweet, shy thought away.

But she met me cordially—said she was glad

to see me—that she had not seen either of us lately ; and the knitting-pins began to move quickly again.

Those dainty fingers—that soft, tremulous smile—I could have hated her !

“ No wonder you did not see us, Miss March ; John has been very ill, is ill now—almost dying.”

I hurled the words at her, sharp as javelins, and watched to see them strike.

They struck—they wounded ; I could see her shiver.

“ Ill !—and no one ever told me ?”

“ You ? How could it affect you ? To me, now”—and my savage words, for they were savage, broke down in a burst of misery—“ nothing in this world to me is worth a straw, in comparison with John. If he dies—”

I let loose the flood of my misery. I dashed it over her, that she might see it—feel it ; that it might enter all the fair and sightly chambers of her happy life, and make them desolate as mine. For was she not the cause ?

Forgive me ! I was cruel to thee, Ursula ; and thou wert so good—so kind !

She rose, came to me, and took my hand. Hers was very cold, and her voice trembled much.

“Be comforted. He is young, and God is very merciful.”

She could say no more, but sat down, nervously twisting and untwisting her fingers. There was in her looks a wild sorrow—a longing to escape from notice; but mine held her fast, mercilessly, as a snake holds a little bird. She sat cowering, almost like a bird, a poor, broken-winged, helpless little bird—whom the storm has overtaken.

Rising, she made an attempt to quit the room.

“I will call Mrs. Jessop: she may be of use—”

“She cannot. Stay!”

“Further advice, perhaps? Doctor Jessop—you must want help—”

“None save that which will never come. His bodily sickness is conquered—it is his mind. Oh, Miss March!”—and I looked up at her like a wretch begging for life—“do *you* not know of what my brother is dying?”

“Dying!” A long shudder passed over her, from head to foot—but I relented not.

“Think—a life like his, that might be made a blessing to all he loves—to all the world—is it to be sacrificed thus? It may be—I do not say it will—but it may be. While in health, he

could fight against this—this which I must not speak of; but now his health is gone. He cannot rally. Without some change, I see clearly, even I, who love him better than any one can love him—”

She stirred a little here.

“Far better,” I repeated; “for while John does *not* love me best, he to me is more than any one else in the world. Yet even I have given up hope, unless—But I have no right to say more.”

There was no need. She began to understand. A deep, soft red, sun-rise colour, dawned all over her face and neck, nay, tinged her very arms—her delicate, bare arms. She looked at me once—just once—with a mute but keen inquiry.

“It is the truth, Miss March—Ay, ever since last year. You will respect it? You will, you shall respect it?”

She bent her head in acquiescence—that was all. She had not uttered a single syllable. Her silence almost drove me wild.

“What! not one word? not one ordinary message from a friend to a friend?—one who is lying ill, too!”

Still silence.

“ Better so !” I cried, made desperate at last. “ Better, if it must be, that he should die and go to the God who made him—ay, made him, as you shall yet see, too noble a man to die for any woman’s love.”

I left her—left her where she sat, and went my way.

Of the hours that followed, the less I say the better. My mind was in a tumult of pain, in which right and wrong were strangely confused. I could not decide—I can scarcely decide now—whether what I had done ought to have been done ; I only know that I did it—did it, under an impulse so sudden and impetuous that it seemed to me like the guidance of Providence. All I could do afterwards was to trust the result where we say we trust all things, and yet are for ever disquieting ourselves in vain—we of little faith !

I have said, and I say again, that I believe every true marriage—of which there is probably one in every five thousand of conjugal unions—is the work of heaven, and heaven only ; and that all human influence is powerless either to make or to mar that happy end. Therefore to heaven I left this marriage, if a marriage it was destined to be. And so, after a season, I calmed

myself enough to dare entering that quiet sick-chamber, where no one ever entered but Jael and me.

The old woman met me at the door.

“Come in gently, Phineas; I do think there is a change.”

A change!—that awful word! I staggered rather than walked to John’s bed-side.

Ay, there was a change, but not *that* one—which made my blood run cold in my veins even to think of. Thank God for evermore for His great mercies—not *that* change!

John was sitting up in bed. New life shone in his eyes, in his whole aspect. Life and—no, not hope, but something far better, diviner.

“Phineas, how tired you look; it is time you were in bed.”

The old way of speaking, the old, natural voice, as I had not heard it for weeks. I flung myself by the bed-side—perhaps I wept outright—God knows! It is thought a shame for a man to weep; yet One Man wept, and that too was over His friend—His brother.

“You must not grieve over me any more, dear lad; to-morrow, please God! I mean to be quite well again.”

Amidst all my joy, I marvelled over what could be the cause of so miraculous a change.

“You would smile if I told you—only a dream.”

No, I did not smile; for I believed in the Ruler of all our spirits, sleeping or waking.

“A dream, so curious, I have scarcely lost the impression of it yet. Do you know, Phineas, she has been sitting by me, just where you sit now.”

“She?”

“Ursula.”

If I could express the tone in which he uttered the word, which had never fallen from his lips before—it was always either “Miss March,” or the impersonal form used by all lovers to disguise the beloved name—“*Ursula*,” spoken as no man speaks any woman’s name save the one which is the music of his heart, which he foresees shall be the one fire-side tune of his life, ever familiar, yet ever sweet.

“Yes, she sat there, talking. She told me she knew I loved her—loved her so much that I was dying for her; that it was very wrong; that I must rise up and do my work in the world—do it for Heaven’s sake, not for hers; that a true man should live, and live nobly, for

the woman he loves—it is only a coward who dies for her.”

I listened, wonder-struck—for these were the very words that Ursula March might have uttered—the very spirit that seemed to shine in her eyes that night—the last night she and John spoke to one another. I asked him if there was any more of the dream?

“Nothing clear. I thought we were on the Flat at Enderley, and I was following her; whether I reached her or not, I cannot tell. And whether I ever shall reach her, I cannot tell. But this I know, Phineas, I will do as she bade me; I will arise and walk.”

And so he did. He slept quietly as an infant all that night. Next morning, I found him up and dressed. Looking like a spectre, indeed; but with health, courage, and hope in his eyes. Even my father noticed it, when at dinner-time, with Jael's help—poor old Jael! how proud she was—John crawled downstairs.

“Why, thee art picking up again, lad! Thee'lt be a man again in no time.”

“I hope so. And a better man than ever I was before.”

“Thee might be better, and thee might be

worse. Anyhow, we couldn't do without thee, John.—Hey, Phineas, who's been meddling with my spectacles?"

The old man turned his back upon us, and busily read his newspaper, upside down.

We never had a happier meal in our house than that dinner.

In the afternoon, my father stayed at home—a great thing for him to do—nay, more, he went and smoked his peaceful pipe in the garden. John lay on the parlour sofa—or rather, an extempore sofa, made of three of our high-backed chairs and the window-sill. I read to him—trying to keep his attention, and mine too, solely to the Great Plague of London and Daniel Defoe. When, just as I was stealthily glancing at his face, fancying it looked whiter and more sunken, that his smile was fading, and his thoughts were wandering,—Jael burst in.

"John Halifax, there be a woman asking for thee."

No, John—no need for that start—that rush of impetuous blood to thy poor thin cheek, as if there were but one woman in all the world. No, it was only Mrs. Jessop.

At sight of him, standing up, tall, and

gaunt, and pale, the good lady's eyes brimmed over.

"You have been very ill, my poor boy! Forgive me—but I am an old woman, you know. Lie down again."

With gentle force she compelled him, and sat down by his side.

"I had no idea—why did you not let us know—the doctor and me? How long have you been ill?"

"I am quite well now—I am, indeed. I shall be about again to-morrow, shall I not, Phineas?" and he looked eagerly to me for confirmation.

I gave it, firmly and proudly. I was glad she should know it—glad she should see that the priceless jewel of his heart would not lie tossing in the mire, because a haughty girl scorned to wear it. Glad, that she might one day find out there lived not the woman of whom John Halifax was not worthy.

"But you must be very careful—very careful of yourself, indeed."

"He will, Mrs. Jessop. Or, if not, he has many to take care of him. Many to whom his life is most precious and most dear."

I spoke—perhaps more abruptly than I ought

to have spoken to that good old lady—but her gentle answer seemed at once to understand and to forgive me.

“I well believe that, Mr. Fletcher. And I think Mr. Halifax hardly knows how much we—we all—esteem him.” And with a kind motherly gesture she took John’s hand. “You must make haste and get well now. My husband will come and see you to-morrow. For Ursula—” here she carefully busied herself in the depths of her pocket—“my dear child sends you this.”

It was a little note—unsealed. The superscription was simply his name, in her clear, round, fair hand-writing—“*John Halifax.*”

His fingers closed over it convulsively. “I—she is—very kind.” The words died away—the hand which grasped, ay, for more than a minute, the unopened letter, trembled like an aspen leaf.

“Yes, hers is a grateful nature,” observed Mrs. Jessop, sedulously looking at and speaking to me. “I would not wish it otherwise—I would not wish her to forget those whose worth she proved in her season of trouble.”

I was silent. The old lady’s tongue likewise

failed her. She took off her glove—wiped a finger across each eye-lash—and sat still.

“Have you read your little note, Mr. Halifax?”

No answer.

“I will take your message back. She told me what she had said to you.”

Ay, all the world might have read those simple lines.

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

“I did not know till yesterday that you had been ill. I have not forgotten how kind you were to my poor father. I should like to come and see you, if you would allow me.

“Yours sincerely,

“URSULA MARCH.”

This was all the note. I saw it, more than thirty years afterwards, yellow and faded, in the corner of his pocket-book.

“Well, what shall I say to my child?”

“Say”—he half rose, struggling to speak—
“Ask her to come.”

He turned his head towards the window, and the sunshine glittered on two great drops, large as a child's tear.

Mrs. Jessop went away. And now for a long hour we waited—scarcely moving. John lay, his eyes sometimes closed—sometimes fixed dreamily on the bit of blue sky that shone out above the iron railings, between the abbey-trees. More than once, they wandered to the little letter which lay buried in his hands. He felt it there—that was enough.

My father came in from the garden, and settled to his afternoon doze; but I think John hardly noticed him—nor I. My poor old father! Yet we were all young once—let youth enjoy its day!

At length—long before I heard a sound—John whispered to himself—“She is coming.”

Ursula came. She stood at the parlour-door, rosy with walking—a vision of youth and candid innocence, which blushed not, nor had need to blush, at any intent or act that was sanctified by the law of God, and by her own heart.

John rose to meet her. They did not speak, but only clasped hands.

He was not strong enough for disguises now—in his first look she might have seen, have felt, that I had told her true. For hers—but it dropped down, down, as Ursula March’s clear

glance had never dropped before. Then, I knew how all would end.

Jael's voice broke in sharply. "Abel Fletcher, the doctor's wife is wanting thee down in the kitchen-garden, and she says, her green gooseberries bean't half as big as our'n."

My father awoke—rubbed his eyes—became aware of a lady's presence—rubbed them again, and sat staring.

John led Ursula to the old man's chair.

"Mr. Fletcher, this is Miss March, a friend of mine, who, hearing I was ill, out of her great kindness——"

His voice faltered. Miss March added, in a low tone, with down-cast eyelids—

"I am an orphan, and he was kind to my dear father."

Abel Fletcher nodded—adjusted his spectacles—eyed her all over—and nodded again; slowly, gravely, with a satisfied inspection. His hard gaze lingered, and softened while it lingered, on that young face, whereon was written simplicity, dignity, truth.

"If thee be a friend of John's, welcome to my house. Wilt thee sit down?"

Offering his hand, with a mixture of kindness and ceremonious grace that I had never

before seen in my Quaker father, he placed her in his own arm-chair. How well I remember her sitting there, in her black silk pelisse, trimmed with the white fur she was so fond of wearing, and her riding-hat, the soft feathers of which drooped on her shoulder, trembling as she trembled. For she did tremble, very much.

Gradually, the old man's perception opened to the facts before him. He ceased his sharp scrutiny, and half smiled.

"Wilt thee stay and have a dish of tea with us?"

So it came to pass, I hardly remember how, that in an hour's space our parlour beheld the strangest sight it had beheld since——Ah, no wonder that when she took her place at the table's foot, and gave him his dish of tea with her own hand, her pretty ringed lady's hand——my old father started, as if it had been another than Miss March who was sitting there. No wonder that, more than once, catching the sound of her low, quiet, gentlewomanlike speech, different from any female voices here, he turned round suddenly with a glance, half-scared, half-eager, as if she had been a ghost from the grave.

But Mrs. Jessop engaged him in talk, and

woman-hater as he was, he could not resist the pleasantness of the doctor's little wife. The doctor, too, came in after tea, and the old folk all settled themselves for a cosy chat, taking very little notice of us three.

Miss March sat at a little table near the window, admiring some hyacinths that Mrs. Jessop had brought us. A wise present ;—she knew, all Norton Bury knew, that if Abel Fletcher had a soft place in his heart, it was for his garden and his flowers. These were very lovely ; in colour and scent delicious to one who had been long ill. John lay looking at them and—at her, as if, oblivious of past and future, his whole life were absorbed into that one exquisite hour.

For me—where I sat, I do not clearly know, nor probably did any one else.

“ There,” said Miss March to herself, in a tone of almost childish satisfaction, as she arranged the last hyacinth to her liking.

“ They are very beautiful,”—I heard John's voice answer, with a strange tremble in it.—“ It is growing too dark to judge of colours ; but the scent is delicious, even here.”

“ I could move the table closer to you.”

“Thank you—let me do it—will you sit down?”

She did so, after a very slight hesitation, by John's side. Neither spoke—but sat quietly there, with the sunset light on their two heads, softly kissing them both, and then as softly melting away in twilight.

“There is a new moon to-night,” Miss March remarked, appositely and gravely.

“Is there? Then I have been ill a whole month. For I remember noticing it through the trees the night when”—

He did not say what night, and she did not ask. To such a very unimportant conversation as they were apparently holding, my involuntary listening could do no harm.

“You will be able to walk out soon, I hope,” said Miss March, again. “Norton Bury is a pretty town.”

John asked, suddenly—“Are you going to leave it?”

“Not yet—I do not know for certain—perhaps not at all. I mean,” she added, hurriedly, “that being independent, and having entirely separated from, and been given up by, my cousins, I prefer residing with Mrs. Jessop altogether.”

“Of course—most natural.” The words were

formally spoken, and John did not speak again for some time.

“I hope,”—said Ursula, breaking the pause, and then stopping, as if her own voice frightened her.

“What do you hope?”

“That long before this moon has grown old, you will be quite strong again.”

“Thank you! I hope so too. I have need for strength, God knows!” He sighed heavily.

“And you will have what you need, so as to do your work in the world. You must not be afraid.”

“I am not afraid. I shall bear my burthen like other men. Every one has some inevitable burthen to bear.”

“So I believe.”

And now the room darkened so fast, that I could not see them; but their voices seemed a great way off, as the children’s voices playing at the old well-head used to sound to me when I lay under the brow of the Flat—in the dim twilights at Enderley.

“I intend,” John said, “as soon as I am able, to leave Norton Bury, and go abroad for some time.”

“Where?”

“To America. It is the best country for a young man who has neither money nor kindred, nor position—nothing, in fact, but his own right hand with which to carve out his own fortunes—as I will, if I can.”

She murmured something, about this being “quite right.”

“I am glad you think so.” But his voice had resumed that formal tone which ever and anon mingled strangely with its low, deep tenderness. “In any case, I must quit England. I have reasons for so doing.”

“What reasons?”

The question seemed to startle John—he did not reply at once.

“If you wish, I will tell you; in order that, should I ever come back—or if I should not come back at all, you, who were kind enough to be my friend, will know I did not go away from mere youthful recklessness, or love of change.”

He waited, apparently for some answer—but it came not, and he continued:

“I am going, because there has befallen me a great trouble, which, while I stay here, I cannot get free from or overcome. I do not wish to sink under it—I had rather, as you said, ‘do my work in the world,’ as a man ought. No man

has a right to say unto his Maker, 'My burthen is heavier than I can bear.' Do you not think so?"

"I do."

"Do you not think I am right in thus meeting, and trying to conquer, an inevitable ill?"

"Is it inevitable?"

"Hush!" John answered, wildly. "Don't reason with me—you cannot judge—you do not know. It is enough that I must go. If I stay I shall become unworthy of myself, unworthy of—— Forgive me, I have no right to talk thus; but you called me 'friend,' and I would like you to think kindly of me always. Because—because——" And his voice shook—broke down utterly. "God love thee and take care of thee, wherever I may go!"

"John, stay!"

It was but a low, faint cry, like that of a little bird. But he heard it—felt it. In the silence of the dark she crept up to him, like a young bird to its mate, and he took her into the shelter of his love for evermore. At once, all was made clear between them; for whatever the world might say, they were in the sight of Heaven equal, and she received as much as she gave.

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When Jael brought in lights, the room seemed to me, at first, all in a wild dazzle. Then I saw John rise, and Miss March with him. Holding her hand, he led her across the room. His head was erect, his eyes shining—his whole aspect that of a man who declares before all the world, “This is *my own*.”

“Eh?” said my father, gazing at them from over his spectacles.

John spoke brokenly, “We have no parents, neither she nor I. Bless her—for she has promised to be my wife.”

And the old man blessed her, with tears.

CHAPTER IV.

“ I HARDLY like taking thee out this wet day, Phineas—but it is a comfort to have thee.”

Perhaps it was, for John was bent on a trying errand. He was going to communicate to Mr. Brithwood of the Mythe, Ursula’s legal guardian and trustee, the fact that she had promised him her hand—him, John Halifax, the tanner. He did it—nay, insisted upon doing it—the day after he came of age, and just one week after they had been betrothed—this nineteenth of June, one thousand eight hundred and one.

We reached the iron gates of the Mythe House ;—John hesitated a minute, and then pulled the bell with a resolute hand.

“ Do you remember the last time we stood here, John ?”

“ I do, well !”

But soon the happy smile faded from his lips,

and left them pressed together in a firm, almost painful gravity. He was not only a lover but a man. And no man could go to meet,—what he knew he must meet in this house, and on this errand, altogether unmoved. One might foresee a good deal—even in the knowing side-glance of the servant, whom he startled with his name, “Mr. Halifax.”

“Mr. Brithwood’s busy, sir—better come to-morrow,” suggested the man—evidently knowing enough upon his master’s affairs.

“I am sorry to trouble him—but I must see Mr. Brithwood to-day.”

And John determinedly followed the man into the grand empty dining room, where, on crimson velvet chairs, we sat and contemplated the great stag’s head with its branching horns, the silver flagons and tankards, and the throstles hopping outside across the rainy lawn :—at our full leisure too, for the space of fifteen minutes.

“This will not do,” said John—quietly enough, though this time it was with a less steady hand that he pulled the bell.

“Did you tell your master I was here?”

“Yes, sir.” And the half-grin with which the footman came in, somehow slid away from his mouth’s corners.

“How soon may I have the honour of seeing him?”

“He says, sir—you must send up your business by me.”

John paused, evidently subduing something within—something unworthy of Ursula’s lover—of Ursula’s husband that was to be.

“Tell your master, my business is solely with himself, and I must request to see him. It is important, say, or I would not thus intrude upon his time.”

“Very well, sir.”

Ere long, the man brought word that Mr. Brithwood would be at liberty for five minutes only, in the justice-room. We were led out, crossing the court-yard once more—where, just riding out, I saw two ladies, one of whom kissed her hand gaily to John Halifax—to the magistrate’s office. There, safely separated from his own noble mansion, Mr. Brithwood administered justice. In the outer room a stout young fellow—a poacher, probably—sat heavily ironed, sullen and fierce; and by the door a girl with a child in her arms, and—God pity her! no ring on her finger—stood crying; another ill-looking fellow maudlin drunk, with a constable by him, called out to us as we passed for “a drop o’ beer.”

These were the people whom Richard Brithwood, Esquire, magistrate for the county of —, had to judge and punish, according to his own sense of equity and his country's law.

He sat behind his office-table, thoroughly magisterial, dictating so energetically to his clerk behind him, that we had both entered, and John had crossed the room, before he saw us, or seemed to see.

“Mr. Brithwood.”

“Oh—Mr. Halifax. Good morning.”

John returned the salutation, which was evidently meant to show that the giver bore no grudge; that, indeed, it was impossible so dignified a personage as Richard Brithwood, Esquire, in his public capacity too, could bear a grudge against so inferior an individual as John Halifax.

“I should be glad, sir, of a few minutes' speech with you.”

“Certainly—certainly—speak on;” and he lent a magisterial ear.

“Excuse me, my business is private,” said John, looking at the clerk.

“No business is private here,” returned the 'Squire, haughtily.

“Then shall I speak with you elsewhere?”

But I must have the honour of an interview with you, and immediately."

Whether Mr. Brithwood was seized with some indefinite alarm, he himself best knew why, or whether John's manner irresistibly compelled him to civility, as the stronger always compels the weaker, I cannot tell—but he signed to the clerk to leave the room.

"And, Jones, send back all the others to the lock-up house till to-morrow. Bless my life! it's near three o'clock. They can't expect to keep a gentleman's dinner waiting—those low fellows."

I suppose this referred only to the culprits outside; at all events, we chose to take it so.

"Now — you, sir — perhaps you'll dispatch your business; the sooner the better."

"It will not take long. It is a mere matter of form, which nevertheless I felt it my duty to be the first to inform you. Mr. Brithwood, I have the honour of bearing a message to you from your cousin—Miss Ursula March."

"She's nothing to me—I never wish to see her face again, the—the vixen!"

"You will be kind enough, if you please, to avoid all such epithets—at least, in my hearing."

“Your hearing! And pray who are you, sir?”

“You know quite well who I am.”

“Oh, yes. And how goes the tanning? Any offers for my old mare? Always happy to meet you in the way of business. But what can you possibly have to do with me, or with any member of my family?”

John bit his lip; the 'Squire's manner was extremely galling; more so, perhaps, in its outside civility than any gross rudeness.

“Mr. Brithwood, I was not speaking of myself, but of the lady whose message I have the honour to bring you.”

“That lady, sir, has chosen to put herself away from her family, and her family can hold no further intercourse with her,” said the 'Squire, loftily.

“I am aware of that,” was the reply, with at least equal hauteur.

“Are you? And pray, what right may *you* have to be acquainted with Miss March's private concerns?”

“The right, which indeed was the purport of her message to you,—that in a few months I shall become her husband.”

John said this very quietly—so quietly, that

at first the 'Squire seemed hardly to credit his senses. At last he burst into a long horse-laugh.

"Well, that is the best joke I ever did hear."

"Pardon me ; I am perfectly serious."

"Bah ! how much money do you want, fellow ? A pretty tale ! you'll not get me to believe it—ha ! ha ! She wouldn't be so mad. To be sure, women have their fancies, as we know, and you're a likely young fellow enough ; but to *marry* you——"

John sprung up—his whole frame quivering with fury. "Take care, sir ; take care ! How dare you insult—my *wife* ?"

He stood over the wretch—the cowardly, shrinking wretch—he did not touch him, but he stood over him till, terrified out of his life, Richard Brithwood gasped out some apology.

"Sit down—pray sit down again. Let us proceed in our business."

John Halifax sat down.

"So—my cousin is your wife, I think you were saying ?"

"She will be, some months hence. We were engaged a week ago, with the full know-

ledge and consent of Doctor and Mrs. Jessop, her nearest friends."

"And of yours?" asked Mr. Brithwood, with as much sarcasm as his blunt wits could furnish him.

"I have no relatives."

"So I always understood. And that being the case, may I ask the meaning of the visit? Where are your lawyers, your marriage settlements, hey? I say, young man—ha! ha! I should like to know what you can possibly want with Miss March's trustee?"

"Nothing whatever. Miss March is perfectly free to choose, and she has chosen me. But as, under certain circumstances, I wish to act with perfect openness, I came to tell you, as her cousin and the executor of her father's will, that she is about to become my wife."

And he lingered over that name, as if its very utterance strengthened and calmed him.

"May I inquire into those 'certain circumstances?'" asked the other, still derisively.

"You know them already. Miss March has a fortune and I have none; and though I wish that difference were on the other side—though it might and did hinder me from seek-

ing her—yet now she is sought and won, it shall not hinder my marrying her.”

“Likely not,” sneered Mr. Brithwood.

John’s passion was rising again.

“I repeat, it shall not hinder me. The world may say what it chooses; we follow a higher law than the world—she and I. She knows me; she is not afraid to trust her whole life with me; am I to be afraid to trust her? Am I to be such a coward as not to dare marry the woman I love, because the world might say I married her for her money?”

He stood, his clenched hand resting on the table, looking full into Richard Brithwood’s face. The ’Squire sat dumb-founded at the young man’s vehemence.

“Your pardon,” John added, more calmly. “Perhaps I owe her some pardon too, for bringing her name thus into discussion; but I wished to have everything clear between myself and you, her nearest relative. You now know exactly how the matter stands. I will detain you no longer—I have nothing more to say.”

“But I have,” roared out the ’Squire; at length, recovering himself, seeing his opponent had quitted the field. “Stop a minute.”

John paused at the door.

“Tell Ursula March she may marry you, or any other vagabond she pleases—it’s no business of mine. But her fortune is my business, and it’s in my hands, too. Might’s right, and possession’s nine-tenths of the law. Not one penny shall she get out of my fingers as long as I can keep hold of it.”

John bowed, his hand still on the door. “As you please, Mr. Brithwood. That was not the subject of our interview. Good morning.”

And we were away.

Re-crossing the iron gates, and out into the open road, John breathed freely.

“That’s over—all is well.”

“Do you think what he threatened is true? Can he do it?”

“Very likely ; don’t let us talk about that.” And he walked on lightly, as if a load were taken off his mind, and body and soul leaped up ; as if to meet the glory of the summer sunshine, the freshness of the summer air.

“O ! what a day this is !—after the rain, too ! How she will enjoy it !”

And coming home through Norton Bury, we met her, walking with Mrs. Jessop. No need to dread that meeting now.

Yet she looked up, questioning, through her blushes. Of course he had told her where we were going to-day ; her, who had a right to know every one of his concerns now.

“ Yes, dear, all is quite right. Do not be afraid.”

Afraid, indeed ! Not the least fear was in those clear eyes. Nothing but perfect content—perfect trust.

John drew her arm through his. “ Come, we need not mind Norton Bury now,” he said, smiling.

So they two walked forward, talking, as we could see, earnestly and rather seriously to one another ; while Mrs. Jessop and I followed behind.

“ Bless their dear hearts !” said the old lady, as she sat resting on the stile of a bean-field. “ Well, we have all been young once.”

Not all, good Mrs. Jessop, thought I ; not all.

Yet, surely it was most pleasant to see them, as it is to see all true lovers—young lovers, too, in the morning of their days. Pleasant to see written on every line of their happy faces the blessedness of Nature’s law of love—love began in youth-time, sincere and pure, free from all sentimental shams, or follies, or shames—love

mutually plighted, the next strongest bond to that in which it will end, and is meant to end, God's holy ordinance of marriage.

We came back across the fields to tea at Mrs. Jessop's. It was John's custom to go there almost every evening; though certainly he could not be said to "go a-courting." Nothing could be more unlike it than his demeanour, or indeed the demeanour of both. They were very quiet lovers, never making much of one another "before folk." No whispering in corners, or stealing away down garden walks. No public show of caresses—caresses whose very sweetness must consist in their entire sacredness; at least, *I* should think so. No coquetish exactions, no testing of either's power over the other, in those perilous small quarrels which may be the renewal of passions, but are the death of true love.

No, our young couple were well-behaved always. She sat at her work, and he made himself generally pleasant, falling in kindly to the Jessops' household ways. But whatever he was about, at Ursula's lightest movement, at the least sound of her voice, I could see him lift a quiet glance, as if always conscious of her

presence ; her who was the delight of his eyes.

To-night, more than ever before, this soft, invisible link seemed to be drawn closer between them, though they spoke little together, and even sat at opposite sides of the table ; but whenever their looks met, one could trace a soft, smiling interchange, full of trust, and peace and joy. He had evidently told her all that had happened to-day, and she was satisfied.

More perhaps than I was ; for I knew how little John would have to live upon besides what his wife brought him ; but that was their own affair, and I had no business to make public either my doubts or fears.

We all sat round the tea-table, talking gaily together, and then John left us, lingeringly enough ; but he always made a point of going to the tan-yard for an hour or two, in my father's stead, every evening. Ursula let him out at the front door ; this was her right, silently claimed, which nobody either smiled at or interfered with.

When she returned, and perhaps she had been away a minute or two longer than was absolutely necessary, there was a wonderful brightness on her young face. Though she listened with a degree of attention most creditable in its gravity,

to a long dissertation of Mrs. Jessop's, on the best and cheapest way of making jam and pickles.

"You know, my dear, you ought to begin and learn all about such things now."

"Yes," said Miss March, with a little droop of the head.

"I assure you,"—turning to me—"she comes every day into the kitchen—never mind, my dear, one can say anything to Mr. Fletcher. And what lady need be ashamed of knowing how a dinner is cooked, and a household kept in order?"

"Nay, she should rather be proud; I know John thinks so."

At this answer of mine, Ursula half-smiled; but there was a colour in her cheek, and a thoughtfulness in her eyes, deeper than any that our conversation warranted or occasioned. I was planning how to divert Mrs. Jessop from the subject, when it was broken at once by a sudden entrance, which startled us all like a flash of lightning.

"Stole away! stole away! as my husband would say. Here have I come in the dusk, all through the streets to Dr. Jessop's

very door. How is she? where is she, *ma petite!*"

"Caroline!"

"Ah! come forward. I haven't seen you for an age."

And Lady Caroline kissed her on both cheeks in her lively, French fashion, which Ursula received patiently, and returned—no, I will not be certain whether she returned it or not.

"Pardon—how do you do, Mrs. Jessop, my dear woman? What trouble I have had in coming. Are you not glad to see me, Ursula?"

"Yes, very." In that sincere voice which never either falsified or exaggerated a syllable.

"Did you ever expect to see me again?"

"No, certainly I did not. And I would almost rather not see you now, if—"

"If Richard Brithwood did not approve of it? Bah! what notions you always had of marital supremacy. So, *ma chère*, you are going to be married yourself, I hear?"

"Yes."

"Why, how quietly you seem to take it! The news perfectly electrified me this morning. I always said that young man was '*un héros de romans!*' *Ma foi!* this is the prettiest little episode I ever heard of. Just King Cophetua

and the beggar-maid—only reversed. How do you feel, my Queen Cophetua?"

"I do not quite understand you, Caroline."

"Neither should I you, for the tale seems incredible. Only you gave me such an honest 'yes,' and I know you never tell even white lies. But it can't be true; at least, not certain. A little *affaire de cœur*, may be—ah! I had several before I was twenty—very pleasant, chivalrous, romantic, and all that; and such a brave young fellow too. *Hélas!* love is sweet at your age!"—with a little sigh—"but marriage! My dear child, you are not surely promised, *fiancée* to this youth?"

"I am."

"How sharply you say it! Nay, don't be angry. I liked him greatly. A very pretty fellow. But then he belongs to the people."

"So do I."

"Naughty child, you will not comprehend me. I mean the lower orders, the bourgeoisie. My husband says he is a tanner's 'prentice-boy."

"He was apprentice; he is now partner in Mr. Fletcher's tan-yard."

"That is nearly as bad. And so you are actually going to marry a tanner?"

"I am going to marry Mr. Halifax. We

will, if you please, cease to discuss him, Lady Caroline."

"*La belle sauvage !*" laughed the lady ; and in the dusk I fancied I saw her reach over to pat Ursula's hand in her careless, pretty way. "Nay, I meant no harm."

"I am sure you did not ; but we will change the subject."

"Not at all. I came to talk about it. I couldn't sleep till I had. *Je t'aime bien, tu le sais, ma petite Ursule.*"

"Thank you," said Ursula, gently.

"And I would like well to see you married. Truly, we women must marry, or be nothing at all. But as to marrying for love, as we used to think of, and as pretty poets make believe—my dear, now-a-days, *nous avons changé tout cela.*"

Ursula replied nothing.

"I suppose, my friend the young bourgeois is very much in love with you ? with '*les beaux yeux de votre cassette,*' Richard swears ; but I know better. What of that ? All men say they love one—but it will not last. It burns itself out. It will be dead in a year, as we wives all know. Do we not, Mrs. Jessop ? Ah ! she is gone away."

Probably they thought I was away too—or else they took no notice of me—and went talking on.

“Jane would not have agreed with you, cousin Caroline; she loved her husband very dearly when she was a girl. They were poor, and he was afraid to marry; so he let her go. That was wrong, I think.”

“How wise are we growing in these things now!” laughed Lady Caroline. “But come, I am not interested in old turtle-doves. Say about yourself.”

“I have nothing more to say.”

“Nothing more? *Mon Dieu!* are you aware that Richard is furious; that he vows he will keep every sous he has of yours—law or no law, for as long as ever he can? He declared so this morning. Did young Halifax tell you?”

“Mr. Halifax has told me.”

“‘*Mr. Halifax!*’ how proudly she says it. And are you still going to be married to him?”

“Yes.”

“What! a bourgeois—a tradesman? with no more money than those sort of people usually have, I believe. You, who have had all sorts of comforts, have always lived as a gentlewoman. Truly, though I adore a love-

marriage, in theory—practically, I think you are mad—quite mad, my dear.”

“Do you?”

“And he, too! Verily, what men are! Especially men in love. All selfish together.”

“Caroline!”

“Isn’t it selfish, now, to drag a pretty creature down, and make her a drudge, a slave—a mere poor man’s wife.”

“She is proud of being such!” burst in the indignant young voice. “Lady Caroline, you may say what you like to me; you were kind always, and I was fond of you; but you shall not say a word of Mr. Halifax. You do not know him—how could you?”

“And you do? Ah, *ma petite*, we all think that, till we find out to the contrary. And so he urges you to be married at once—rich or poor—at all risks, at all costs? How lover-like—how like a man! I guess it all. Half beseeches—half persuades—”

“He does not!” And the girl’s voice was sharp with pain. “I would not have told you, but I must—for his sake. He asked me this afternoon, if I was afraid of being poor? if I would like to wait, and let him work hard alone,

till he could give me a home like that I was born to? He did, Caroline."

"And you answered—"

"No—a thousand times, no! He will have a hard battle to fight—would I let him fight it alone? when I can help him—when he says I can."

"Ah, child! you that know nothing of poverty, how can you bear it?"

"I will try."

"You that never ruled a house in your life—"

"I can learn."

"*Ciel!* 'tis wonderful! And this young man has no friends, no connections, no fortune! only himself."

"Only himself," said Ursula, with a proud content.

"Will you tell me, my dear, why you marry him?"

"Because"—and Ursula spoke in low tones, that seemed wrung out of her almost against her will—"because I honour him, because I trust him; and, young as I am, I have seen enough of the world to be thankful that there is in it one man whom I can trust, can honour, entirely. Also—though I am often ashamed lest this be selfish—because when I was in trouble

he helped me ; when I was misjudged, he believed in me ; when I was sad and desolate, he loved me. And I am proud of his love—I glory in it. No one shall take it from me—no one will—no one can, unless I cease to deserve it.”

Lady Caroline was silent. Despite her will, you might hear a sigh breaking from some deep corner of that light, frivolous heart.

“ *Vraiment ! chacun à son goût !* But you have never stated one trifle—not unnecessary, perhaps, though most married folk get on quite well without it.—‘ Honour,’ ‘ trust,’—pshaw ! My child—do you *love* Mr. Halifax ? ”

No answer.

“ Nay—why be shy ? In England, they say, and among the people—no offence, *ma petite*—one does sometimes happen to care for the man one marries. Tell me, for I must be gone, do you love him ? one word, whether or no ? ”

Just then the light coming in, showed Ursula’s face, beautiful with more than happiness, uplifted even with a religious thankfulness, as she said simply,

“ John knows.”

CHAPTER V.

IN the late autumn, John married Ursula March. He was twenty-one, and she eighteen. It was very young—too young, perhaps, prudent folk might say : and yet sometimes I think a double blessing falls on unions like this. A right and holy marriage, a true love-marriage, be it early or late, is—must be, sanctified and happy ; yet those have the best chance of happiness, who, meeting on the very threshold of life, enter upon its duties together ; with free, fresh hearts, easily moulded the one to the other, rich in all the riches of youth, acute to enjoy, brave and hopeful to endure.

Such were these two—God bless them !

They were married quite privately, neither having any near kindred. Besides, John held strongly to the opinion that so solemn a festival as marriage is only desecrated by outward show. And so, one golden autumn morn-

ing, Ursula walked quietly up the Abbey aisle, in her plain white muslin gown ; and John and she plighted their faithful vows, no one being present except the Jessops and I. They then went away for a brief holiday—went away without either pomp or tears, entirely happy—husband and wife together.

When I came home, and revealed the fact, my good father seemed little surprised. He had expressly desired not to be told anything of the wedding till it was over—he hated marriages.

“But since it is done, may be ’tis as well,” said he, grimly. “She seems a kindly young thing—wise, even—for a woman.”

“And pleasant too, father?”

“Ay, but favour is deceitful, and beauty vain. So the lad’s gone :” and he looked round, as if missing John, who had lived in our house ever since his illness. “I thought as much, when he bade me good night, and asked my leave to take a journey. So he’s married and gone ! Come, Phineas, sit thee down by thy old father ; I am glad thee wilt always remain a bachelor.”

So we settled ourselves, my father and I ; and while the old man smoked his meditative pipe, I sat thinking of the winter evenings when we two lads had read by the fire-side ; the sum-

mer days when we had lounged on the garden wall. He was a married man now, the head of a household; others had a right—the first, best, holiest right—to the love that used to be all mine; and though it was a marriage entirely happy and hopeful, though all that day and every day I rejoiced both with and for my brother, still it was rather sad to miss him from our house, to feel that his boyish days were quite over—that his boyish place would know him no more.

But of course I had fully overcome, or at least suppressed this feeling, when, John having brought his wife home, I went to see them in their own house.

I had seen it once before; it was an old dwelling-house, which my father bought with the flour-mill, situated in the middle of the town, the front windows looking on the street, the desolate garden behind shut in by four brick walls. A most un-bridal-like abode. I feared they would find it so, even though John had been busy there the last two months, in early mornings and late evenings, keeping a comical secrecy over the matter, as if he were jealous that any one but himself should lend an eye, or put a

finger to the dear task of making ready for his young wife.

They could not be great preparations, I knew, for the third of my father's business promised but a small income. Yet the gloomy outside being once passed, the house looked wonderfully bright and neat; the walls and doors newly painted and delicately stencilled:—"Master did all that himsel'," observed the proud little handmaid, Martha—Jem Watkins's sweetheart. I had begged the place for her myself of Mistress Ursula.) Though only a few rooms were furnished, and that very simply, almost poorly, all was done with taste and care; the colours well mingled, the wood-work graceful and good.

They were out gardening, John Halifax and his wife—

Ay, his wife; he was a husband now. They looked so young, both of them, he kneeling, planting box-edging, she standing by him with her hand on his shoulder—the hand with the ring on it. He was laughing at something she had said, thy very laugh of old, David! Neither heard me come till I stood close by.

"Phineas, welcome, welcome!" He wrung my hand fervently, many times; so did Ursula,

blushing rosy red. They both called me "brother," and both were as fond and warm as any brother and sister could be.

A few minutes after, Ursula—"Mrs. Halifax," as I said I ought to call her now—slipped away into the house, and John and I were left together. He glanced after his wife till she was out of sight, played with the spade, threw it down, placed his two hands on my shoulders, and looked hard in my face. His was trembling with deep emotion.

"Art thou happy, David?"

"Ay, lad, almost afraid of my happiness. God make me worthy of it, and of her!"

He lifted his eyes upward; there was in them a new look, sweet and solemn, a look which expressed the satisfied content of a life now rounded and completed by that other dear life which it had received into and united with its own—making a full and perfect whole, which, however kindly and fondly it may look on friends and kindred outside, has no absolute need of any, but is complete in and sufficient to itself—as true marriage should be. A look, unconsciously fulfilling the law—God's own law—that a man shall leave father and mother,

brethren and companions, and shall cleave unto his wife, and "they two shall become one flesh."

And although I rejoiced in his joy, still I felt half-sadly for a moment, the vague, fine line of division which was thus for evermore drawn between him and me, of no fault on either side, and of which he himself was unaware. It was but the right and natural law of things, the difference between the married and the unmarried, which only the latter feel. Which, perhaps, the Divine One meant them to feel—that out of their great solitude of this world may grow a little inner Eden, where they may hear His voice, "walking in the garden in the cool of the day."

We went round John's garden; there was nothing Eden-like about it, being somewhat of a waste still, divided between ancient cabbage-beds, empty flower-beds, and great old orchard-trees, very thinly laden with fruit.

"We'll make them bear better next year," said John, hopefully. "We may have a very decent garden here in time." He looked round his little domain with the eye of a master, and put his arm, half-proudly, half-shyly, round his wife's shoulders—she had sidled up to him, ostensibly bringing him a letter, though I think

only for an excuse, because in those sweet early days they naturally liked to be in each other's sight continually. It was very beautiful to see what a demure, soft, meek matronliness had come over the high spirit of the "Nut-browne Mayde."

"May I?" she said, peeping over him as he read.

"Of course you may, little one." A comical pet-name for him to give her, who was anything but small. I could have smiled, remembering the time when John Halifax bowed to the stately and dignified young gentlewoman who stood at Mrs. Tod's door. To think he should ever have come to call Miss Ursula March "little one!"

But this was not exactly a time for jesting, since, on reading the letter, I saw the young wife flush an angry red, and then look grave. Until John, crumpling up the paper, and dropping it almost with a boyish frolic into the middle of a large rosemary-bush, took his wife by both her hands, and gazed down into her troubled face, smiling.

"You surely don't mind this, love? We knew it all before. It can make no possible difference."

"No! But it is so wrong—so unjust. I never believed he dared do it—to you."

"Hear her, Phineas! She thinks nobody

dare do anything ill to her husband—not even Richard Brithwood.”

“ He is a—”

“ Hush, dear !—we will not talk about him ; since, for all his threats, he can do us no harm ; and, poor man ! he never was, never will be, half as happy as we.”

That was true. So Mr. Brithwood’s insulting letter was left to moulder harmlessly away in the rosemary-bush, and we all walked up and down the garden, talking over a thousand plans for making ends meet in that little household. To their young hopefulness even poverty itself became a jest ; and was met cheerfully, like an honest, hard-featured, hard-handed friend, whose rough face was often kindly, and whose harsh grasp made one feel the strength of one’s own.

“ We mean,” John said gaily, “ to be two living Essays on the Advantages of Poverty. We are not going to be afraid of it, or ashamed of it. We don’t care who knows it. We consider that our respectability lies solely in our two selves.”

“ But your neighbours ?”

“ Our neighbours may think of us exactly when they like. Half the sting of poverty is

gone when one keeps house for one's own comfort and not for the comments of one's neighbours."

"I should think not," Ursula cried, tossing back her head in merry defiance. "Besides, we are young, we have few wants, and we can easily reduce our wants to our havings."

"And no more grey silk gowns?" said her husband, half-fondly, half-sadly.

"You would not be so rude as to say I shall not look equally well in a cotton one? And as for being as happy in it—why, I know best."

He smiled at her once more,—that tender, manly smile, which made all soft and lustrous the inmost depths of his brown eyes; truly no woman need be afraid, with a smile like that to be the strength, the guidance, the sunshine of her home.

We went in, and the young mistress showed us her new house; we investigated and admired all, down to the very scullery; then we adjourned to the sitting-room—the only one—and, after tea, Ursula arranged her books, some on stained shelves, which she proudly informed me were of John's own making, and some on an old spinnet, which he had picked up, and which, she said,

was of no other use than to hold books, since she was not an accomplished young lady, and could neither sing nor play.

“But you don’t dislike the spinnet, Ursula? It caught my fancy. Do you know I have a faint remembrance that once, on such a thing as this, my mother used to play?”

He spoke in a low voice; Ursula stole up to him, with a fond, awed look.

“You never told me anything about your mother?”

“Dear, I had little to tell. Long ago, you knew who you were going to marry—John Halifax, who had no friends, no kindred, whose parents left him nothing but his name.”

“And you cannot remember them?”

“My father, not at all; my mother, very little.”

“And have you nothing belonging to them?”

“Only one thing. Should you like to see it?”

“Very much.” She still spoke slowly and with slight hesitation. “It was hard for him not to have known his parents,” she added, when John had left the room. “I should like to have known them too. But still—when I know *him*—”

She smiled, tossing back the coronet of curls

from her forehead—her proud, pure forehead, that would have worn a coronet of jewels more meekly than it now wore the unadorned honour of being John Halifax's wife. I wished he could have seen her.

That minute he re-appeared.

"Here, Ursula, is all I have of my parents. No one has seen it, except Phineas there, until now."

He held in his hand the little Greek Bible which he had shewed me years before. Carefully, and with the same fond, reverent look as when he was a boy, he undid the case, made of old faded silk, with ribbon strings—doubtless a woman's work—it must have been his mother's. His wife touched it, softly and tenderly. He shewed her the fly-leaf—she looked over the inscription—and then repeated it aloud.

"*'Guy Halifax, gentleman.'* I thought—I thought—"

She looked up, with pleased surprise—she would not have been a woman, especially a woman reared in pride of birth, not to have felt and testified the like pleasure, for a moment.

“You thought that I was only a labourer’s son ; or—nobody’s. Well, does it signify ?”

“No,” she cried, as clinging round his neck, and throwing her head back, she looked at him with all her heart in her eyes. “No, it does *not* signify. Were your father the king on his throne, or the beggar in the streets, it would be all the same to me ; you would still be yourself—*my* husband—*my* John Halifax.”

“God bless thee—my own wife that He has given me !” John murmured, through his close embrace.

They had altogether forgotten any one’s presence, dear souls ! so I kept them in that happy oblivion, by slipping out to Martha in the kitchen, and planning with her how we could at least spare Jem Watkins two days a week to help in the garden, under Mr. Halifax’s orders.

“Only, Martha,” smiled I, with a warning finger, “no idling and chattering. Young folk must work hard, if they want to come to the happy ending of your master and mistress.”

The little maid grew the colour of her swain’s pet peonies, and promised obedience. Conscientious Jem there was no fear of—all the rosy-cheeked damsels in Christendom would not have turned him aside from one iota of his duty to

Mr. Halifax. Thus there was love in the parlour, and love in the kitchen. And, I verily believe, the young married couple were served all the better for their kindness and sympathy to the humble pair of sweethearts in the rank below them.

John walked home with me—a pleasure I had hardly expected, but which was insisted upon both by him and Ursula. For from the very first of her betrothal, there had been a thorough brother and sisterly bond established between her and me. Her womanly, generous nature, would have scorned to do what, as I have heard, many young wives do—seek to make coldness between her husband and his old friends. No ; secure in her riches, in her rightful possession of his whole heart, she took into hers everything that belonged to John, every one he cared for ; to be for ever held sacred and beloved, being his and her own. Thus, we were the very best of friends, my sister Ursula and me.

John and I talked a little about her—of her rosy looks, which he hoped would not fade in their town dwelling—and of good Mrs. Tod's wonderful delight at seeing her, when, last week, they had stayed two days in the dear old cottage

at Enderley. But he seemed slow to speak about his wife, or to dilate on a joy so new that it was hardly to be breathed in, lest it might melt in air.

Only when, as we were crossing the street, a fine equipage passed it, he looked after it with a smile.

“Grey ponies ! she is so fond of long-tailed grey ponies. Poor child ! when shall I be able to give her a carriage ? Well, Phineas, perhaps some day—who knows !”

He turned the conversation, and began telling me about the cloth mill—his old place of resort ; which he had been over once again, when they were at Rose Cottage.

“And do you know, while I was looking at the machinery, a notion came into my head, that instead of that great water-wheel—you remember it ?—it might be worked by steam.”

“What sort of steam ?”

“Phineas, your memory is no better, I see. Have you forgotten my telling you how, last year, some Scotch engineer tried to move boats by steam, on the Forth and Clyde canal ? Why should not the same power be turned to account in a cloth-mill ? I know it could—I have got the plan of the machinery in my head

already. I made a drawing of it last night, and showed it to Ursula ; *she* understood it directly."

I smiled.

"And I do believe, by common patience and skill, a man might make his fortune with it at those Enderley cloth-mills."

"Suppose you try !". I said it half in jest, and was surprised to see how seriously John took it.

"I wish I could try—if it were only practicable. Once or twice I have thought it might be. The mill belongs to Lord Luxmore. His steward works it. Now, if one could get to be a foreman or overseer—"

"Try—you can do anything you try."

"No, I must not think of it—she and I have agreed that I must not," said he, steadily. "It's my weakness—my hobby, you know. But—no hobbies now. Above all, I must not, for a mere fancy, give up the work that lies under my hand. What of the tan-yard, Phineas ?"

"My father missed you, and grumbled after you a good deal. He looks anxious, I think. He vexes himself more than he need about business."

"Don't let him. Keep him as much at home

as you can. I'll manage the tan-yard; you know—and he knows too—that every thing which can be done for us all, I shall do.”

I looked up, surprised at the extreme earnestness of his manner.

“Surely, John——”

“Nay, there is nothing to be uneasy about—nothing more than there has been for this year past. All trade is bad just now. Never fear, we'll weather the storm—I'm not afraid.”

Cheerfully as he spoke, I began to guess—what he already must have known—that our fortunes were as a slowly leaking ship, of which the helm had slipped from my old father's feeble hand. But John had taken it—John stood firm at the wheel. Perhaps, with God's blessing, he might yet guide us safe to land.

I had not time to say more, when, with its pretty grey ponies, the curricie once more passed our way. Two ladies were in it: one leaned out and bowed. Presently a lacquey came to beg Mr. Halifax would come and speak with Lady Caroline Brithwood.

“Shall you go, John?”

“Certainly—why not?” And he stepped forward to the carriage-side.

“Ah! delighted to see *mon beau cousin*. This

is he, Emma," turning to the lady who sat by her—oh, what a lovely face that lady had! no wonder it drove men mad; ay, even that brave man, in whose honest life can be chronicled only this one sin, of being bewitched by her.

John caught the name—perhaps, too, he recognized the face—it was only too public, Heaven knows! His own took a sternness such as I had never before seen, and yet there was a trace of pity in it too.

"You are quite well—indeed, he looks so—*n'est-ce pas, ma chère?*"

John bore gravely the eyes of the two ladies fixed on him, in rather too plain admiration—very gravely, too, he bowed.

"And what of our young bride, our treasure that we stole—nay, it was quite fair—quite fair. How is Ursula?"

"I thank you, Mrs. Halifax is well."

Lady Caroline smiled at the manner, courteous through all its coldness, which not ill became the young man. But she would not be repelled.

"I am delighted to have met you—Indeed, we must be friends. One's friends need not always be the same as one's husband's, eh, Emma? You will be enchanted with our fair

bride. We must both seize the first opportunity, and come as disguised princesses, to visit Mrs. Halifax."

"Again let me thank you, Lady Caroline. But——"

"No 'but's.' I am resolved. Mr Brithwood will never find it out. And if he does—why, he may. I like you both; I intend us to be excellent friends, whenever I chance to be at Norton Bury. Don't be proud, and reject me, there's good people—the only good people I ever knew who were not disagreeable."

And leaning on her large ermine muff, she looked right into John's face, with the winning sweetness which Nature, not courts, lent to those pretty features—already beginning to fade, already trying to hide by art their painful, premature decay.

John returned the look, half sorrowfully; it was so hard to give back harshness to kindness. But a light laugh from the other lady caught his ear, and his hesitation—if hesitation he had felt, was over.

"No, Lady Caroline, it cannot be. You will soon see yourself that it cannot. Living, as we do, in the same neighbourhood, we may meet occasionally by chance, and always, I hope, with

kindly feeling ; but under present circumstances—indeed, under any circumstances, intimacy between your house and ours would be impossible.”

Lady Caroline shrugged her shoulders with a pretty air of pique. “As you will ! I never trouble myself to court the friendship of any one. *Le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle.*”

“Do not mistake me,” John said, earnestly. “Do not suppose I am not grateful for your former kindness to my wife ; but the difference between her and you—between your life and hers—is so great, so infinite.”

“*Vraiment !*” with another shrug and smile, rather a bitter one.

“Our two paths lie wide apart—wide as the poles ; our house and our society would not suit you ; and that my wife should ever enter yours”—glancing from one to the other of those two faces, painted with false roses, lit by false smiles—“No, Lady Caroline,” he added, firmly, “it is impossible.”

She looked mortified for a moment, and then resumed her gaiety, which nothing could ever banish long.

“Hear him, Emma ! So young and so un-

kindly ! *Mais nous verrons.* You will change your mind. *Au revoir, mon beau cousin."*

They drove off quickly, and were gone.

" John, how strange this meeting was. What will Mrs. Halifax say ?"

" My innocent girl ! thank God she is safe away from them all—safe in a poor man's honest breast." He spoke with much emotion.

" Yet Lady Caroline——"

" Did you see who sat beside her ?"

" That beautiful woman ?"

" Poor soul ! alas for her beauty ! Phineas, that was Lady Hamilton."

He said no more, nor I. At my own door he left me, with his old merry laugh, his old familiar grasp of my shoulder.

" Lad, take care of thyself, though I'm not by to see. Remember, I am just as much thy tyrant as if I were living here still."

I smiled, and he went his way, to his own quiet, blessed, married home.

CHAPTER VI.

THE winter and spring passed calmly by. I had much ill-health, and could go out very little ; but they came constantly to me, John and Ursula, especially the latter. During this illness, when I learned to watch longingly for her kind face, and listen for her cheerful voice talking pleasantly and sisterly beside my chair, she taught me to give up ‘Mrs. Halifax,’ and call her Ursula. It was only by slow degrees I did so, truly ; for she was not one of those gentle creatures whom, married or single, one calls instinctively by their christian names. Her manner in girlhood was not exactly either “meek” or “gentle,” except towards him, the only one who ever ruled her, and to whom she was, through life, the meekest and tenderest of women. To every one else she comported herself, at least in youth, with a dignity and deci-

sion—a certain stand-off-ishness—so that, as I said, it was not quite easy to speak to or think of her as “Ursula.” Afterwards, when seen in the light of a new character, for which Heaven destined and especially fitted her, and in which she appeared altogether beautiful—I began to give her another name—but it will come by-and-by.

In the long Midsummer days, when our house was very quiet and rather dreary, I got into the habit of creeping over to John’s home, and sitting for hours under the apple-trees in his garden. It was now different from the wilderness he found it; the old trees were pruned and tended, and young ones planted. Mrs. Halifax called it proudly “our orchard,” though the top of the tallest sapling could be reached with her hand. Then, in addition to the indigenous cabbages, came long rows of white-blossomed peas, big-headed cauliflowers, and all vegetables easy of cultivation. My father sent contributions from his celebrated gooseberry-bushes, and his wall-fruit, the pride of Norton Bury; and Mrs. Jessop stocked the borders from her great parterres of sweet-scented common flowers; so that, walled in as it was, and in the midst of a town likewise, it was growing into a very tolerable

garden. Just the kind of garden that I love—half trim, half wild—fruits, flowers, and vegetables living in comfortable equality and fraternity, none being too choice to be harmed by their neighbours, none esteemed too mean to be restricted in their natural profusion. Oh! dear old-fashioned garden! full of sweet-Williams and white-Nancies, and larkspur and London-pride, and yard-wide beds of snowy saxifrage, and tall pale evening primroses, and hollyhocks six or seven feet high, many-tinted, from yellow to darkest ruby-colour; while for scents, large blushing cabbage-roses, pinks, gilly-flowers,—with here and there a great bush of southernwood or rosemary, or a border of thyme, or a sweet-briar hedge.—A pleasant garden, where all colours and perfumes were blended together; ay, even a stray dandelion, that stood boldly up in his yellow waistcoat, like a young country bumpkin, who feels himself a decent lad in his way,—or a plant of wild marjoram, that had somehow got in, and kept meekly in a corner of the bed, trying to turn into a respectable cultivated herb. Dear old garden!—such as one rarely sees now-a-days!—I would give the finest modern pleasure-ground for the like of thee!

This was what John's garden became ; its every inch and every flower still live in more memories than mine, and will for a generation yet ; but I am speaking of it when it was young, like its creators. These were Mrs. Halifax and her husband, Jem and Jenny. The master could not do much ; he had long, long hours in his business ; but I used to watch Ursula, morning after morning, superintending her domain, with her faithful attendant Jem—Jem adored his “ missis.” Or else, when it was hot noon, I used to lie in their cool parlour, and listen to her voice and step about the house, teaching Jenny, or learning from her—for the young gentlewoman had much to learn, and was not ashamed of it either. She laughed at her own mistakes, and tried again ; she never was idle or dull for a minute. She did a great deal in the house herself. Often she would sit chatting with me, having on her lap a coarse brown pan, shelling peas, slicing beans, picking gooseberries ; her fingers—Miss March's fair fingers—looking fairer for the contrast with their unaccustomed work. Or else, in the summer evenings, she would be at the window sewing — always sewing — but so placed, that with one glance she could see down the street

where John was coming. Far, far off she always saw him ; and at the sight her whole face would change and brighten, like a meadow when the sun comes out. Then she ran to open the door, and I could hear his low “my darling !” and a long, long pause, in the hall.

They were very, very happy in those early days—those quiet days of poverty—when they visited nobody and nobody visited them ; when their whole world was bounded by the dark old house and the garden with its four high walls.

One July night, I remember, John and I were walking up and down the paths by star-light. It was very hot weather, inclining one to stay without doors half the night. Ursula had been with us a good while, strolling about on her husband’s arm ; then he had sent her in to rest, and we two remained out together.

How soft they were, those faint, misty, summer stars ! what a mysterious, perfumy haze they let fall over us !—A haze through which all around seemed melting away in delicious intangible sweetness, in which the very sky above our heads—the shining, world-besprinkled sky—was a thing felt rather than seen.

“How strange all seems ! how unreal !”

said John, in a low voice, when he had walked the length of the garden in silence. "Phineas, how very strange it seems!"

"What seems?"

"What?—oh, everything." He hesitated a minute. "No, not everything—but something which to me seems now to fill and be mixed up with all I do, or think, or feel. Something you do not know—but to-night Ursula said I might tell you."

Nevertheless, he was several minutes before he told me.

"This pear-tree is full of fruit—is it not? How thick they hang; and yet it seems but yesterday that Ursula and I were standing here, trying to count the blossoms."

He stopped—touching a branch with his hand. His voice sank so, I could hardly hear it.

"Do you know, Phineas, that when this tree is bare—we shall, if with God's blessing all goes well—we shall have—a little child."

I wrung his hand in silence.

"You cannot imagine how strange it feels. A child—hers and mine—little feet to go pattering about our house—a little voice to say—Think, that by Christmas-time I shall be a *father*!"

He sat down on the garden-bench, and did not speak for a long time.

“I wonder,” he said at last, “if, when I was born, *my* father was as young as I am ; whether he felt as I do now. You cannot think what an awful joy it is to be looking forward to a child ; a little soul of God’s giving, to be made fit for His eternity. How shall we do it ! We that are both so ignorant, so young—she will be only just nineteen when — please God—her baby is born. Sometimes, of an evening, we sit for hours on this bench—she and I, talking of what we ought to do, and how we ought to rear the little thing, until we fall into silence, awed at the blessing that is coming to us.”

“God will help you both, and make you wise.”

“We trust He will ; and then we are not afraid.”

A little while longer I sat by John’s side, catching the dim outline of his face, half uplifted, looking towards those myriad worlds, which we are taught to believe, and do believe, are not more precious in the Almighty sight than one living human soul.

But he said no more of the hope that was coming, or of the thoughts which, in the holy

hush of that summer-night, had risen out of the deep of his heart. And though after this time, they never again formed themselves into words, yet he knew well that not a hope or joy, or fear of his, whether understood or not, could be unshared by me.

In the winter, when the first snow lay on the ground—the little one came.

It was a girl—I think they had wished for a son ; but they forgot all about it when the tiny maiden appeared. She was a pretty baby—at least, all the women-kind said so, from Mrs. Jessop down to Jael, who left our poor house to its own devices, and trod stately in Mrs. Halifax's, exhibiting to all beholders the mass of white draperies with the infinitesimal human morsel inside them, which she vehemently declared was the very image of its father.

For that young father—

But I—what can *I* say ! How should *I* tell of the joy of a man over his first-born ?

I did not see John till a day afterwards—when he came into our house, calm, happy, smiling. But Jael told me, that when she first placed his baby in his arms, he had wept like a child.

The little maiden grew with the snow-drops.

Winter might have dropped her out of his very lap, so exceedingly fair, pale, and pure-looking, was she. I had never seen, or at least never noticed, any young baby before; but she crept into my heart before I was aware. I seem to have a clear remembrance of all the data in her still and quiet infancy, from the time her week-old fingers with their tiny pink nails—a ludicrous picture of her father's hand in little—made me smile, as they closed over mine.

She was named Muriel—after the rather peculiar name of John's mother. Her own mother would have it so; only wishing out of her full heart, happy one! that there should be a slight alteration made in the second name. Therefore the baby was called Muriel Joy,—Muriel Joy Halifax.

That name—beautiful, sacred, and never-to-be-forgotten among us—I write it now with tears.

* * * *

In December, 1802, she was born—our Muriel. And on February 9th—alas! I have need to remember the date!—she formally received her name. We all dined at John's house—Dr. and Mrs. Jessop, my father and I.

It was the first time my father had taken a meal under any roof but his own, for twenty years. We had not expected him—since, when asked and entreated, he only shook his head; but just when we were all sitting down to the table, Ursula at the foot, her cheeks flushed, and her lips dimpling with a housewifely delight that everything was so nice and neat, she startled us by a little cry of pleasure. And there, in the door-way, stood my father.

His broad figure, but slightly bent even now, his smooth-shaven face, withered, but of a pale brown still, with the hard lines softening down, and the keen eyes kinder than they used to be; dressed carefully in his First-day clothes, the stainless white kerchief supporting his large chin, his Quaker's hat in one hand, his stick in the other, looking in at us, a half-amused twitch mingling with the gravity of his mouth—thus he stood—thus I see thee, O my dear old father!

The young couple seemed as if they never could welcome him enough. He only said, "I thank thee, John," "I thank thee, Ursula;" and took his place beside the latter, giving no reason why he had changed his mind and come. Simple as the dinner was, simple as befitted those who,

their guests knew, could not honestly afford luxuries; though there were no dainties, and no ornaments, save the centre nosegay of laurestinas and white Christmas roses—I do not think King George himself ever sat down to a nobler feast.

Afterwards, we drew merrily round the fire, or watched outside the window the thickly-falling snow.

“It has not snowed these two months,” said John—“Never since the day our little girl was born.”

And at this moment, as if she heard herself mentioned, and was indignant at our having forgotten her so long, the little maid up-stairs set up a cry—that unmistakeable child’s cry, which seems to change the whole atmosphere of a household.

My father gave a start—he had never seen or expressed a wish to see John’s daughter. We knew he did not like babies. Again the little helpless wail; Ursula rose up and stole away—Abel Fletcher looked after her with a curious expression, then began to say something about going back to the tan-yard.

“Do not, pray do not leave us,” John en-

treated; "Ursula wants to show you our little lady."

My father put out his hands in deprecation; or as if desiring to thrust from him a host of thronging, battling thoughts. Still came faintly down at intervals the tiny voice, dropping into a soft coo of pleasure, like a wood-dove in its nest—every mother knows the sound. And then Mrs. Halifax entered, holding in her arms her little winter-flower, her baby daughter.

Abel Fletcher just looked at it and her—closed his eyes against both, and looked no more.

Ursula seemed pained a moment, but soon forgot it in the general admiration of her treasure.

"She might well come in a snow-storm," said Mrs. Jessop, taking the child. "She is just like snow—so soft and white."

"And as soundless—she hardly ever cries. She just lies in this way half the day over, cooing quietly, with her eyes shut. There, she has caught your dress fast. Now, was there ever a two months' old baby so quick at noticing things? and she does it all with her fingers—she touches everything;—ah! take care, doctor," the mother added, reproachfully, at a loud slam of the door, which made the baby tremble all over.

“I never knew a child so susceptible of sounds,” said John, as he began talking to it, and soothing it;—how strange it was to see him! and yet it seemed quite natural already. “I think even now she knows the difference between her mother’s voice and mine; and any sudden noise always startles her in this way.”

“She must have astonishingly quick hearing,” said the good doctor, slightly annoyed.

Ursula wisely began to talk of something else—showed Muriel’s eye-lashes, very long for such a baby—and descanted on the colour of her eyes, that fruitful and never-ending theme of mothers and friends.

“I think they are like her father’s; yes, certainly like her father’s. But we have not many opportunities of judging, for she is such a lazy young damsel, she hardly ever opens them—we should often fancy her asleep, but for that little soft coo; and then she will wake up all of a sudden. There now! do you see her? Come to the window, my beauty! and shew Dr. Jessop your bonny brown eyes.”

They were bonny eyes! lovely in shape and colour, delicately fringed; but there was something strange in their expression—or rather, in

their want of it. Many babies have a round, vacant stare—but this was no stare, only a wide, full look, a look of quiet blankness—an *unseeing* look.

It caught Dr. Jessop's notice. I saw his air of vexed dignity change into a certain anxiety.

"Well, whose are they like—her father's or mine? His, I hope—it will be the better for her beauty. Nay, we'll excuse all compliments."

"I—I can't exactly tell. I could judge better by candle-light."

"We'll have candles."

"No—no! Had we not better put it off altogether, till another day?—I'll call in to-morrow, and look at her eyes."

His manner was hesitating and troubled. John noticed it.

"Love, give her to me. Go and get us lights, will you?"

When she was gone, John took his baby to the window, gazed long and intently into her little face, then at Dr. Jessop. "Do you think—no—it's not possible—that there can be anything the matter with my child's eyes?"

Ursula coming in, heard the last words.

“What was that you said about baby’s eyes?”

No one answered her. All were gathered in a group at the window, the child being held on her father’s lap, while Dr. Jessop was trying to open the small white lids, kept so continually closed. At last the baby uttered a little cry of pain—the mother darted forward, and clasped it almost savagely to her breast.

“I will not have my baby hurt. There is nothing wrong with her sweet eyes. Go away; you shall not touch her, John.”

“Love!”

She melted at that low, fond word; leaned against his shoulder—trying to control her tears.

“It shocked me so—the bare thought of such a thing.—Oh! husband, don’t let her be looked at again.”

“Only once again, my darling. It is best. Then we shall be quite satisfied. Phineas, give me the candle.”

The words—caressing, and by strong constraint, made calm and soothing—were yet firm. Ursula resisted no more, but let him take Muriel—little, unconscious, cooing dove!

Lulled by her father's voice, she once more opened her eyes, wide. Dr. Jessop passed the candle before them many times, once so close that it almost touched her face ; but the full, quiet eyes never blenched nor closed. He set the light down.

"Doctor!" whispered the father, in a wild appeal against—ay, it was against certainty. He snatched the candle, and tried the experiment himself.

"She does not see at all. Can she be blind?"

"Born blind."

Yes, those pretty baby-eyes were dark—quite dark. There was nothing painful nor unnatural in their look, save, perhaps, the blankness of gaze which I have before noticed. Outwardly their organization was perfect ; but in the fine inner mechanism was something wrong—something wanting. She never had seen—never would see—in this world.

"*Blind !*" The word was uttered softly, hardly above a breath, yet the mother heard it. She pushed every one aside, and took the child herself. Herself, with a desperate incredulity, she looked into those eyes, which never could look back either her agony or her love. Poor mother !

“John! John! oh, John!”—the name rising into a cry, as if he could surely help her. He came and took her in his arms—took both, wife and babe. She laid her head on his shoulder in bitter weeping. “Oh! John, it is so hard. Our pretty one—our own little child!”

John did not speak; but only held her to him—close and fast. When she was a little calmer, he whispered to her the comfort—the sole comfort even her husband could give her—through Whose will it was that this affliction came.

“And it is more an affliction to you than it will be to her, poor pet!” said Mrs. Jessop, as she wiped her friendly eyes. “She will not miss what she never knew. She may be a happy little child. Look, how she lies and smiles.”

But the mother could not take that consolation yet. She walked to and fro, and stood rocking her baby, mute indeed, but with tears falling in showers. Gradually her anguish wept itself away, or was smothered down, lest it should disturb the little creature asleep on her breast.

Some one came behind her, and placed her

in the arm-chair, gently. It was my father. He sat down by her, taking her hand.

“Grieve not, Ursula. I had a little brother who was blind. He was the happiest creature I ever knew.”

My father sighed. We all marvelled to see the wonderful softness, even tenderness, which had come into him.

“Give me thy child for a minute.” Ursula laid it across his knees; he put his hand solemnly on the baby-breast. “God bless this little one! Ay, and she shall be blessed.”

These words, spoken with as full assurance as the prophetic benediction of the departing patriarchs of old, struck us all. We looked at little Muriel as if the blessing were already upon her; as if the mysterious touch which had sealed up her eyes for ever, had left on her a sanctity like as of one who has been touched by the finger of God.

“Now, children, I must go home,” said my father.

They did not detain us: it was indeed best that the poor young parents should be left alone.

“You will come again soon?” begged Ursula, tenderly clasping the hand which he had

laid upon her curls as he rose, with another murmured "God bless thee!"

"Perhaps. We never know. Be a good wife to thy husband, my girl. And John, never be thou harsh to her, nor too hard upon her little failings. She is but young—but young."

He sighed again. It was plain to see he was thinking of another than Ursula.

As we walked down the street, he spoke to me only once or twice, and then of things which startled me by their strangeness—things which had happened a long time ago; sayings and doings of mine in my childhood, which I had not the least idea he had either known of or remembered.

When we got in-doors, I asked if I should come and sit with him till his bed-time.

"No—no; thee looks tired, and I have a business letter to write. Better go to thy bed as usual."

I bade him good night, and was going, when he called me back.

"How old art thee, Phineas—twenty-four or five?"

"Twenty-five, father."

"Eh! so much?" He put his hand on my

shoulder, and looked down on me kindly, even tenderly. "Thee art but weakly still, but thee must pick up, and live to be as old a man as thy father. Good night. God be with thee, my son!"

I left him. I was happy. Once, I had not thought my old father and I would have got on together so well, or loved one another so dearly.

In the middle of the night Jael came into my room, and sat down on my bed's foot, looking at me. I had been dreaming strangely, about my own childish days, and about my father and mother when they were young.

What Jael told me—by slow degrees, and as tenderly as when she was my nurse, years ago—seemed at first so unreal as to be like a part of the dream.

At ten o'clock, when she had locked up the house, she had come as usual to the parlour-door, to tell my father it was bed-time. He did not answer, being sitting with his back to the door, apparently busy writing. So she went away.

Half-an-hour afterwards, she came again. He sat there still—he had not moved. One hand supported his head; the other, the fingers stiffly holding the pen, lay on the table. He seemed

intently gazing on what he had written. It ran thus :

“GOOD FRIEND,

“To-morrow I shall be—”

But there the hand had stopped—for ever.

O, dear father ! on that to-morrow thou wert with God !

CHAPTER VII.

It was the year 1812. I had lived for ten years as a brother, in my adopted brother's house, whither he had brought me on the day of my father's funeral ; entreating that I should never leave it again. For, as was shortly afterwards made clear, fate — say Providence — was now inevitably releasing him from a bond, from which, so long as my poor father lived, John would never have released himself. It was discovered that the profits of the tanning trade had long been merely nominal—that of necessity, for the support of our two families, the tan-yard must be sold, and the business confined entirely to the flour-mill.

At this crisis, as if the change of all things broke her stout old heart, which never could bend to any new ways—Jael died. We laid her at my father's and mother's feet—poor old Jael ! and that grave-yard in St. Mary's Lane

now covered over all who loved me, all who were of my youth days—my very own.

So thought I—or might have thought—but that John and Ursula then demanded with one voice, “ Brother, come home.”

I resisted long : for it was one of my strong opinions, that married people ought to have no one, be the tie ever so close and dear, living permanently with them, to break the sacred duality—no, let me say the unity of their home.

I wished to try and work for my living, if that were possible—if not, that out of the wreck of my father’s trade might be found enough to keep me, in some poor way. But John Halifax would not hear of that. And Ursula—she was sitting sewing, while the little one lay on her lap, cooing softly with shut eyes—Ursula took my hand to play with Muriel’s. The baby-fingers closed over mine—“ See there, Phineas ; *she* wants you too.” So I stayed.

Perhaps it was on this account, that better than all his other children, better than anything on earth except himself, I loved John’s eldest daughter, little blind Muriel.

He had several children now. The dark old house, and the square town garden, were alive with their voices from morning till night. First,

and loudest always, was Guy—born the year after Muriel. He was very like his mother, and her darling. After him came two more, Edwin and Walter. But Muriel still remained as “sister”—the only sister either given or desired.

If I could find a name to describe that child, it would be not the one her happy mother gave her at her birth, but one more sacred, more tender. She was better than Joy—she was an embodied Peace.

Her motions were slow and tranquil — her voice soft—every expression of her little face, extraordinarily serene. Whether creeping about the house, with a foot-fall silent as snow, or sitting among us, either knitting busily at her father’s knee, or listening to his talk and the children’s play—everywhere and always, Muriel was the same. No one ever saw her angry, restless, or sad. The soft dark calm in which she lived seemed never broken by the troubles of this our troublous world.

She was, as I have said, from her very babyhood, a living peace. And such she was to us all, during those ten struggling years, when our household had much to contend with—much to endure. If at night, her father came home

jaded and worn, sickened to the soul by the hard battle he had to fight daily, hourly, with the outside world, Muriel would come softly and creep into his bosom, and he was comforted. If, busying herself about, doing faithfully her portion too, that the husband when he came in of evenings might find all cheerful and never know how heavy had been the household cares during the day — if, at times, Ursula's voice took too sharp a tone—at sight of Muriel it softened at once. No one could speak anything but soft and sweet words when the blind child was by.

Yet, I think either parent would have looked amazed, had any one pitied them for having a blind child. The loss—a loss only to them, and not to her, the darling!—became familiar, and ceased to wound—the blessedness was ever new. “*Ay, and she shall be blessed,*” had said my dear father. So she was. From her, or for her, her parents never had to endure a single pain. Even the sicknesses of infancy and childhood, of which the three others had their natural share, always passed her by, as if in pity. Nothing ever ailed Muriel.

The spring of 1812 was an era long remembered in our family. Scarlet fever went

through the house — safely, thank God ! but leaving Walter almost at death's door. When at last they all came round, and we were able to gather our pale little flock to a garden feast, under the big old pear-tree, it was with the trembling thankfulness of those who have gone through great perils, hardly dared to be recognized as such till they were over.

“ Ay, thank God it is over ! ” said John, as he put his arm round his wife, and looked in her worn face, where still her own smile lingered—her bright, brave smile, that nothing could ever drive away. “ And now we must try and make a little holiday for you.”

“ Nonsense ! I am as well as possible. Did not Dr. Jessop tell me this morning, I was looking younger than ever ? I—a mother of a family, thirty years old ? Pray, Uncle Phineas, do I look my age ? ”

I could not say she did not—especially now. But she wore it so gracefully, so carelessly, that I saw — ay, and truly her husband saw — a sacred beauty about her jaded cheek, more lovely and loveable than all the bloom of her youth. Happy woman ! who was not afraid of growing old.

“ Love ” — John usually called her “ Love ” —

putting it at the beginning of a sentence, as if it had been her natural Christian name—which, as in all infant households, had been gradually dropped or merged into the universal title of “mother.” My name for her was always emphatically, “The Mother”—the truest type of motherhood I ever knew.

“Love,” her husband again began, after a long look in her face—ah, John, thine was altered too, but himself was the last thing *he* thought of—“Say what you like—I know what we’ll do, for the children’s sake, in any case. Ah, that’s her weak point ;—see, Phineas, she is yielding now—We’ll go for three months to Longfield.”

Now Longfield was the Utopia of our family, old and young. A very simple family we must have been—for this Longfield was only a small farm-house, about six miles off, where once we had been to tea, all together, and where ever since we had longed to live. For pretty as our domain had grown, it was still in the middle of a town, and the children, like all naturally-reared children, craved after the freedom of the country—after corn-fields, hay-fields, nuttings, blackberryings—delights hitherto known only at rare intervals, when their father could spare a

whole long day, and be at once the sun and the shield of the happy little band.

“Hearken, children! father says we shall go for three whole months to live at Longfield.”

The three boys set up a shout of ecstasy.

“I’ll swim boats down the stream, and catch and ride every one of the horses. Hurrah!” shouted Guy.

“And I’ll see after the ducks and chickens, and watch all the threshing and winnowing,” said Edwin, the practical and grave.

“And I’ll get a ’ittle lamb to p’ay wid me,” lisped Walter—still “the baby”—or considered such, and petted accordingly.

“But what does my little daughter say?” said the father, turning—as he always turned, at the lightest touch of those soft, blind fingers, creeping along his coat sleeve. “What will Muriel do at Longfield?”

“Muriel will sit all day and hear the birds sing.”

“So she shall, my blessing!” He often called her his ‘blessing,’—which in truth she was. To see her now, leaning her cheek against his—the small soft face, almost a miniature of his own, the hair, a paler shade of the same bright colour, curling in the same elastic

rings—they looked less like ordinary father and daughter, than like a man and his good angel; the visible embodiment of the best half of his soul. So she was ever to him, this child of his youth—his first-born and his dearest.

The Longfield plan being once started, father and mother and I began to consult together as to ways and means; what should be given up, and what increased, of our absolute luxuries, in order that the children might this summer—possibly every summer—have the glory of “living in the country.” Of these domestic consultations there was never any dread, for they were always held in public. There were no secrets in our house. Father and mother, though sometimes holding different opinions, had but one thought, one aim—the family good. Thus, even in our lowest estate, there had been no bitterness in our poverty; we met it, looked it in the face, often even laughed at it. For it bound us altogether, hand in hand; it taught us endurance, self-dependance, and, best of all lessons, self-renunciation. I think, one’s whole after-life is made easier and more blessed, by having known what it was to be very poor when one was young.

Our fortunes were rising now, and any little pleasure did not take near so much contrivance.

We found we could manage the Longfield visit—ay, and a horse for John to ride to and fro—without any worse sacrifice than that of leaving Jenny—now Mrs. Jem Watkins, but our cook still—in the house at Norton Bury, and doing with one servant instead of two. Also, though this was not publicly known till afterwards, by the mother's renouncing a long-promised silk dress—the only one since her marriage, in which she had determined to astonish John by choosing it the same colour as that identical grey gown he had seen hanging up in the kitchen at Enderley.

“But one would give up anything,” she said, “that the children might have such a treat, and that father might have rides backwards and forwards through green lanes all summer. Oh, how I wish we could always live in the country.”

“Do you?” And John looked—much as he had looked at long-tailed grey ponies in his bridegroom days—longing to give her everything she desired. “Well, perhaps, we may manage it some time.”

“When our ship comes in—namely, that money which Richard Brithwood will not pay, and John Halifax will not go to law to make

him. Nay, father dear, I am not going to quarrel with any one of your crotchets." She spoke with a fond pride, as always, even when arguing against the too-Quixotic carrying out of the said crotchets. "Perhaps, as the reward of forbearance, the money will come some day when we least expect it; then John shall have his heart's desire, and start the cloth-mills at Enderley."

John smiled, half-sadly. Every man has a hobby—this was his, and had been for fifteen years. Not merely the making a fortune, as he still firmly believed it could be made, but the position of useful power, the wide range of influence, the infinite opportunities of doing good.

"No, love; I shall never be 'patriarch of the valley,' as Phineas used to call it. The yew-hedge is too thick for me, eh, Phineas?"

"No!" cried Ursula—we had told her this little incident of our boyhood—"you have got half through it already. Everybody in Norton Bury knows and respects you. I am sure, Phineas, you might have heard a pin fall at the meeting last night, when he spoke against hanging the Luddites. And such a shout as rose when he ended—oh, how proud I was!"

“Of the shout, love?”

“Nonsense!—but of the cause of it. Proud to see my husband defending the poor and the oppressed—proud to see him honoured and looked up to, more and more every year, till—”

“Till it may come at last to the prophecy in your birth-day verse—‘Her husband is known in the gates; he sitteth among the elders of the land.’”

Mrs. Halifax laughed at me for reminding her of this, but allowed that she would not dislike its being fulfilled.

“And it will be too. He is already ‘known in the gates,’ known far and near. Think how many of our neighbours come to John to settle their differences, instead of going to law! And how many poachers has he no persuaded out of their dishonest—”

“Illegal,” corrected John.

“Well, their illegal ways, and made decent, respectable men of them! Then, see how he is consulted, and his opinion followed, by rich folk as well as poor folk, all about the neighbourhood. I am sure John is as popular, and has as much influence, as many a member of parliament.”

John smiled with an amused twitch about

his mouth, but he said nothing. He rarely did say anything about himself—not even in his own household. The glory of his life was its unconsciousness—like our own silent Severn however broad and grand its current, that course seemed the natural channel into which it flowed.

“There’s Muriel,” said the father, listening.

Often thus the child slipped away, and suddenly we heard all over the house the sweet sounds of “Muriel’s voice,” as some one had called the old harpsichord. When almost a baby, she would feel her way to it, and find out first harmonies, then tunes, with that quickness and delicacy of ear peculiar to the blind.

“How well she plays! I wish I could buy her one of those new instruments they call ‘piano-fortes;’ I was looking into the mechanism of one the other day.”

“She would like an organ better,” I told him. “You should have seen her face in the Abbey church this morning.”

“Hark! she has stopped playing. Guy, run and bring your sister here,” said the father, ever yearning after his darling.

Guy came back with a wonderful story of two gentlemen in the parlour, one of whom had

patted his head—"Such a grand gentleman, a great deal grander than father!"

That was true, as regarded the bright nan-keens, the blue coat with gold buttons, and the showiest of cambric kerchiefs swathing him up to the very chin. To this "grand" personage John bowed formally, but his wife flushed up in surprised recognition.

"It is so long since I had the happiness of meeting Miss March, that I conclude Mrs. Halifax has forgòtten me?"

"No, Lord Luxmore: allow me to introduce my husband?"

And, I fancied, some of Miss March's old hauteur returned to the mother's softened and matronly mien;—pride, but not for herself or in herself, now. For, truly, as the two men stood together—though Lord Luxmore had been handsome in his youth, and was universally said to have as fine manners as the Prince Regent himself—any woman might well have held her head loftily, introducing John Halifax as "my husband."

Of the two, the nobleman was least at his ease, for the welcome of both Mr. and Mrs. Halifax, though courteous, was decidedly cold. They did not seem to feel, and, if rumour spoke

true, I doubt if any honest, virtuous, middle-class fathers and mothers would have felt—that their house was greatly honoured or sanctified by the presence of the Earl of Luxmore.

But the nobleman was, as I have said, wonderfully fine-mannered. He broke the ice at once.

“Mr. Halifax, I have long wished to know you. Mrs. Halifax, my daughter encouraged me to pay this impromptu visit.”

Here ensued polite inquiries after Lady Caroline Brithwood; we learned that she was just returned from abroad, and was entertaining, at the Mythe House, her father and brother.

“Pardon—I was forgetting my son—Lord Ravenel.”

The youth thus presented merely bowed. He was about eighteen or so, tall and spare, with thin features and large soft eyes. He soon retreated to the garden-door, where he stood, watching the boys play, and shyly attempting to make friends with Muriel.

“I believe Ravenel has seen you, years ago, Mrs. Halifax. His sister made a great pet of him as a child. He has just completed his education—at the college of St. Omer, was it not, William?”

“The Catholic college of St. Omer,” repeated the boy.

“Tut — what matters !” said the father, sharply. “Mr. Halifax, do not imagine we are a Catholic family still. I hope the next Earl of Luxmore will be able to take the oaths and his seat, whether or no we get Emancipation. By the bye, you uphold the Bill ?”

John expressed his firm conviction, then unhappily a rare one, that every one’s conscience is free ; and that all men of blameless life ought to be protected by, and allowed to serve, the state, whatever be their religious opinions.

“Mr. Halifax, I entirely agree with you. A wise man esteems all faiths alike worthless.”

John drew back. “Excuse me, my lord, that was the very last thing I meant to say. I hold every man’s faith so sacred, that no other man has a right to interfere with it or to question it. The matter lies solely between himself and his Maker.”

“Exactly ! What facility of expression your husband has, Mrs. Halifax ! He must be — indeed I have heard he is — a first-rate public speaker.”

The wife smiled, wife-like ; but John said, hurriedly —

"I have no pretension or ambition of the kind. I merely now and then try to put plain truths, or what I believe to be such, before the people, in a form they are able to understand."

"Ay, that is it. My dear sir, the people have no more brains than the head of my cane—(his Royal Highness's gift, Mrs. Halifax) — they must be led or driven, like a flock of sheep. We"—a lordly we!—"are their proper shepherds. But then we want a middle class—at least, an occasional voice from it, a—"

"A shepherd's dog, to give tongue," said John, somewhat drily. "In short, a public orator. In the House, or out of it?"

"Both." And the Earl tapped his boot with that royal cane, smiling. "Yes; I see you apprehend me. But, before we commence that somewhat delicate subject, there was another on which I desired my agent, Mr. Brown, to obtain your valuable opinion."

"You mean, when, yesterday, he offered me, by your lordship's express desire, the lease, lately fallen in, of your cloth-mills at Enderley?"

Now John had not told us that!—why, his manner too plainly showed.

"And all will be arranged, I trust? Brown

says you have long wished to take the mills ; I shall be most happy to have you for a tenant."

"My lord, as I told your agent, it is impossible. We will say no more about it."

John crossed over to his wife with a cheerful air. She sat looking grave and sad.

Lord Luxmore had the reputation of being a keen-witted, diplomatic personage ; undoubtedly he had or could assume that winning charm of manner which had descended in perfection to his daughter. Both qualities it pleased him to exercise now. He rose, addressing with kindly frankness the husband and wife.

"If I may ask—being a most sincere well-wisher of yours, and a sort of connection of Mrs. Halifax's, too—why is it impossible?"

"I have no wish to disguise the reason : it is because I have no capital."

Lord Luxmore looked surprised. "Surely—excuse me, but I had the honour of being well acquainted with the late Mr. March—surely your wife's fortune—"

Ursula rose, in her old impetuous way—"His wife's fortune !—(John, let me say it ?—I will, I must !)—of his wife's fortune, Lord Luxmore, he has never received one farthing. Richard

Brithwood keeps it back ; and my husband would work day and night for me and our children rather than go to law."

"Oh ! on principle, I suppose ? I have heard of such opinions," said the earl, with the slightest perceptible sneer. "And you agree with him ?"

"I do, heartily. I would rather we lived poor all our days, than that he should wear his life out, trouble his spirit, perhaps even soil his conscience, by squabbling with a bad man over money matters."

It was good to see Ursula as she spoke ; good to see the look that husband and wife interchanged—husband and wife, different in many points, yet so blessedly, so safely *one* ! Then John said, in his quiet way—

"Love, perhaps another subject than our own affairs would be more interesting to Lord Luxmore."

"Not at all—not at all !" And the earl was evidently puzzled and annoyed. "Such extraordinary conduct," he muttered : "so very—a-hem !—unwise. If the matter were known—caught up by those newspapers—I must really have a little conversation with Brithwood."

The conversation paused, and John changed it entirely, by making some remarks on the present minister, Mr. Percival.

“I liked his last speech much. He seems a clear-headed, honest man, for all his dogged opposition to the Bill.”

“He will never oppose it more.”

“Nay, I think he will, my lord—to the death.”

“That may be—and yet—” his lordship smiled. “Mr. Halifax, I have just had news by carrier pigeon—my birds fly well—most important news for us and our party. Yesterday, in the lobby of the House of Commons, Mr. Percival was shot.”

We all started. An hour ago we had been reading his speech. Mr. Percival shot!

“Oh John,” cried the mother, her eyes full of tears; “his poor wife—his fatherless children!”

And for many minutes they stood, hearing the lamentable history, and looking at their little ones at play in the garden; thinking, as many an English father and mother did that day, of the stately house in London, where the widow and orphans bewailed their dead. He might or might not be a great statesman, but he was

undoubtedly a good man ; many still remember the shock of his untimely death, and how, whether or not they liked him living, all the honest hearts of England mourned for Mr. Percival.

Possibly, that number did not include the Earl of Luxmore.

“ *Requiescat in pace!* I shall propose the canonization of poor Bellingham. For now Percival is dead, there will be an immediate election ; and on that election depends Catholic Emancipation. Mr. Halifax,” turning quickly round to him, “you would be of great use to us in parliament.”

“ Should I ? ”

“ Will you—I like plain speaking—will you enter it ? ”

Enter parliament ! John Halifax in parliament ! His wife and I were both astounded by the suddenness of the possibility ; which, however, John himself seemed to receive as no novel idea.

Lord Luxmore continued. “ I assure you nothing is more easy ; I can bring you in at once, for a borough near here—my family borough.”

“ Which you wish to be held by some conve-

nient person till Lord Ravenel comes of age? So Mr. Brown informed me yesterday."

Lord Luxmore slightly frowned. Such transactions, as common then in the service of the country as they still are in the service of the church, were yet generally glossed over, as if a certain discredit attached to them. The young lord seemed to feel it; at sound of his name, he turned round to listen, and turned back again, blushing scarlet. Not so the Earl, his father.

"Brown is—(may I offer you a pinch, Mr. Halifax?—what, not the Prince Regent's own mixture?)—Brown is indeed a worthy fellow—*mais trop prononcé*. As it happens, my son is yet undecided between the church—that is, the priesthood—and politics. But to our conversation—Mrs. Halifax, may I not enlist you on my side? We could easily remove all difficulties, such as qualification, &c. Would you not like to see your husband member for the old and honourable borough of Kingswell?"

"Kingswell!" It was a tumble-down village, where John held and managed for me the sole remnant of landed property which my poor father had left me. "Kingswell! why there are not a dozen houses in the place."

"The fewer the better, my dear madam. The

election would cost me scarcely any—trouble; and the country be vastly the gainer by your husband's talents and probity. Of course, he will give up the—I forget what is his business now—and live independent. He is made to shine as a politician: it will be both happiness and honour to myself to have in some way contributed to that end. Mr. Halifax, you will accept my borough?"

"Not on any consideration your lordship could offer me."

Lord Luxmore scarcely credited his ears. "My dear sir—you are the most extraordinary—may I again enquire your reasons?"

"I have several; one will suffice. Though I wish to gain influence—power perhaps; still the last thing I should desire would be political influence."

"You might possibly escape that unwelcome possession," returned the earl, somewhat sarcastically. "Half the House of Commons is made up of harmless dummies, who vote as we bid them."

"A character, my lord, for which I doubt I am unfitted. Until political conscience ceases to be the thing of traffic, until the people are honestly allowed to choose their own honest

representatives, I must decline being of that number. Shall we dismiss the subject?"

"With pleasure, sir."

And courtesy being met by courtesy — the question so momentous was passed over, and merged into trivialities. Perhaps the earl, who, as his pleasures palled, was understood to be fixing his keen wits upon the pet profligacy of old age, politics—saw, clearly enough, that in these chaotic days of contending parties, when the maddened outcry of the "people" was just being heard and listened to, it might be as well not to make an enemy of this young man, who, with a few more, stood as it were midway in the gulf, now slowly beginning to narrow, between the commonalty and the aristocracy.

He stayed some time longer, and then bowed himself away with a gracious condescension worthy of the Prince of Wales himself, carrying with him the shy, gentle Lord Ravenel, who had spoken scarcely six words the whole time.

When he was gone, the father and mother seemed both relieved.

"Truly, John, he has gained little by his visit, and I hope it may be long before we see an earl in our quiet house again. Come in to dinner, my children."

But his lordship had left an uncomfortable impression behind him. It lasted even until that quiet hour—often the quietest and happiest of our day—when, the children being all in bed, we elders closed in round the fire.

Ursula and I sat there, longer alone than usual.

“John is late to-night,” she said more than once; and I could see her start, listening to every foot under the window, every touch at the door-bell; not stirring, though: she knew his foot and his ring quite well always.

“There he is!” we both said at once—much relieved; and John came in.

Brightness always came in with him. Whatever cares he had without—and they were heavy enough, God knows—they always seemed to slip off the moment he entered his own door; and whatever slight cares we had at home, we put them aside; as they could not but be put aside, nay, forgotten—at the sight of him.

“Well, Uncle Phineas! Children all right, my darling? A fire! I’m glad of it. Truly, to-night is as cold as November.”

“John, if you have a weakness, it is for fire. You’re a regular salamander.”

He laughed—warming his hands at the blaze.

“Yes, I would rather be hungry than cold, any day. Love, our one extravagance is certainly coals. A grand fire this! I do like it so!”

She called him “foolish;” but smoothed down with a quiet kiss the forehead he lifted up to her as she stood beside him, looking as if she would any day have converted the whole house into fuel, for his own private and particular benefit.

“Little ones all in bed, of course?”

“Indeed, they would have lain awake half the night — those naughty boys — talking of Longfield. You never saw children so delighted.”

“Are they?” I thought the tone was rather sad, and that the father sat listening with less interest than usual to the pleasant little household chronicle, always wonderful and always new, which it was his custom to ask for and have, night after night, when he came home,—saying it was to him, after his day’s toil, like a “babbling o’ green fields.”—Soon it stopped.

“John, dear, you are very tired?”

“Rather.”

“Have you been very busy all day?”

“Very busy.”

I understood, almost as well as his wife did,

what those brief answers indicated ; so, stealing away to the table where Guy's blurred copy-book and Edwin's astonishing addition-sums were greatly in need of Uncle Phineas, I left my fireside corner to those two. Soon, John settled himself in my easy chair, and then one saw how very weary he was—wearily in body and soul alike—wearily as we seldom beheld him. It went to my heart to watch the listless stretch of his large, strong frame—the sharp lines about his mouth—lines which ought not to have come there in his two-and-thirty years. And his eyes—they hardly looked like John's eyes, as they gazed in a sort of dull quietude, too anxious to be dreamy, into the red coals—and nowhere else.

At last, he roused himself, and took up his wife's work.

“More little coats! Love, you are always sewing.”

“Mothers must—you know. And I think never did boys out-grow their things like our boys. It is pleasant, too. If only clothes did not wear out so fast.”

“Ah!” A sigh—from the very depth of the father's heart.

“Not a bit too fast for my clever fingers,

though," said Ursula, quickly. "Look, John, at this lovely braiding. But I'm not going to do any more of it. I shall certainly have no time to waste over fineries at Longfield."

Her husband took up the fanciful work, admired it, and laid it down again. After a pause, he said—

"Should you be very much disappointed if—if we did not go to Longfield at all?"

"Not go to Longfield!" The involuntary exclamation showed how deep her longing had been.

"Because, I am afraid—it is hard, I know—but I am afraid we cannot manage it. Are you very sorry?"

"Yes," she said, frankly and truthfully. "Not so much for myself, but—the children."

"Ay, the poor children."

Ursula stitched away rapidly for some moments, till the grieved look faded out of her face; then she turned it, all cheerful once more, to her husband. "Now, John, tell me. Never mind about the children. Tell me."

He told her, as was his habit at all times, of some losses which had to-day befallen him—bad debts in his business—which would make it, if not impracticable, at least imprudent, to

enter on any new expenses that year. Nay, he must, if possible, retrench a little. Ursula listened, without question, comment, or complaint.

“Is that all?” she said at last, very gently.

“All.”

“Then never mind. I do not. We will find some other pleasures for the children. We have so many pleasures, ay, all of us. Husband, it is not so hard to give up this one.”

He said, in a whisper, low almost as a lover’s, “I could give up anything in the world but them and thee.”

So, with a brief information to me at supper-time—“Uncle Phineas, did you hear? we cannot go to Longfield”—the renunciation was made, and the subject ended. For this year, at least, our Arcadian dream was over.

But John’s troubled looks did not pass away. It seemed as if this night his long toil had come to that crisis when the strongest man breaks down—or trembles within a hair’s breadth of breaking down; conscious too, horribly conscious, that if so, himself will be the least part of the universal ruin. His face was haggard, his movements irritable and restless; he started

nervously at every sound. Sometimes even a hasty word, an uneasiness about trifles, shewed how strong was the effort he made at self-control. Ursula, usually by far the most quick-tempered of the two, became to-night mild and patient. She neither watched nor questioned him—wise woman as she was; she only sat still, busying herself over her work, speaking now and then of little things, lest he should notice her anxiety about him. He did at last.

“Nay, I am not ill, do not be afraid. Only my head aches so—let me lay it here, as the children do.”

His wife made a place for it on her shoulder; there it rested—the poor tired head, until gradually the hard and painful expression of the features relaxed, and it became John’s own natural face—as quiet as any of the little faces on their pillows up-stairs, whence, doubtless, slumber had long banished all anticipation of Longfield. At last, he, too, fell asleep.

Ursula held up her finger, that I might not stir. The clock in the corner, and the soft sobbing of the flame on the hearth, were the only sounds in the parlour. She sewed on quietly, to the end of her work; then let it drop on her lap, and sat still. Her cheek

leaned itself softly against John's hair, and in her eyes, which seemed so intently contemplating the little frock, I saw large bright tears gather—fall. But her look was serene, nay, happy; as if she thought of these beloved ones, husband and children—her very own—preserved to her in health and peace,—ay, and in that which is better than either, the unity of love. For that priceless blessing, for the comfort of being *his* comfort, for the sweetness of bringing up these his children in the fear of God and in the honour of their father—she, true wife and mother as she was, would not have exchanged the wealth of the whole world.

“What's that!” We all started, as a sudden ring at the bell pealed through the house, waking John, and frightening the very children in their beds. All for a mere letter too, brought by a lackey of Lord Luxmore's. Having—somewhat indignantly—ascertained this fact, the mother ran up stairs to quiet her little ones. When she came down, John still stood with the letter in his hand. He had not told me what it was—when I chanced to ask, he answered in a low tone—“Presently!” On his wife's entrance, he gave her the letter without a word.

Well might it startle her into a cry of joy. Truly the dealings of heaven to us were wonderful !

“ Mr. John Halifax.

“ SIR,

“ Your wife, Ursula Halifax, having attained the age fixed by her late father as her majority, I will, within a month after date, pay over to your order all monies, principal and interest, accruing to her, and hitherto left in my hands, as trustee, according to the will of the late Henry March, Esquire.

“ I am, sir,

“ Yours, &c.

“ RICHARD BRITHWOOD.”

“ Wonderful—wonderful !”

It was all I could say. That one bad man, for his own purposes, should influence another bad man to an act of justice—and that their double evil should be made to work out our good ! Also, that this should come just in our time of need—when John’s strength seemed ready to fail.

“ Oh John—John ! now you need not work so hard !”

That was his wife's first cry, as she clung to him almost in tears.

He too was a good deal agitated. This sudden lifting of the burthen made him feel how heavy it had been—how terrible the responsibility—how sickening the fear.

“Thank God! In any case, you are quite safe now—you and the children!”

He sat down, very pale. His wife knelt beside him, and put her arms round his neck—I quietly went out of the room.

When I came in again, they were standing by the fire-side—both cheerful, as two people to whom had happened such unexpected good fortune, might naturally be expected to appear. I offered my congratulations in rather a comical vein than otherwise; we all of us had caught John's habit of putting things in a comic light whenever he felt them keenly.

“Yes, he is a rich man now—mind you treat your brother with extra respect, Phineas.”

“And your sister too.

‘For she sall walk in silk attire,
And siller hae to spare.’

She's quite young and handsome still— isn't she?

How magnificent she'll look in that grey silk gown !”

“John—you ought to be ashamed of yourself ! you—the father of a family ! you—that are to be the largest mill-owner at Enderley—”

He looked at her fondly, half deprecatingly. “Not till I have made you and the children all safe—as I said.”

“We are safe—quite safe—when we have you. Oh Phineas ! make him see it as I do. Make him understand that it will be the happiest day in his wife's life, when she knows him happy in his heart's desire.”

We sat a little while longer, talking over the strange change in our fortunes—for they wished to make me feel that now, as ever, what was theirs was mine ; then Ursula took her candle to depart.

“Love,” John cried, calling her back as she shut the door, and watching her stand there patient—watching with something of the old mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Mrs. Halifax, when shall I have the honour of ordering your long-tailed grey ponies ?”

CHAPTER VIII.

NOT many weeks afterwards, we went to live at Longfield, which henceforth became the family home for many years.

Longfield ! happy Longfield ! little nest of love, and joy, and peace—where the children grew up, and we grew old—where season after season brought some new change ripening in us and around us—where summer and winter, day and night, the hand of God's providence was over our roof, blessing our goings out and our comings in, our basket and our store ; crowning us with the richest blessing of all, that we were made a household where "brethren dwelt together in unity." Beloved Longfield ! my heart slow pulsing as befits one near the grave, thrills warm and young as I remember thee !

Yet how shall I describe it—the familiar spot ; so familiar that it seems to need no description at all.

It was but a small place when we first came there. It led out of the high-road by a field-gate—the White Gate ; from which a narrow path wound down to a stream, thence up a green slope to the house ; a mere farm-house, nothing more. It had one parlour, three decent bedrooms, kitchen and out-houses ; we built extempore chambers out of the barn and cheese-room, in one of which the boys, Guy and Edwin, slept ; against the low roof, of which the father generally knocked his head every morning when he came to call the lads. Its windows were open all summer round, in at which birds and bats used oftentimes to fly, to the great delight of the youthful inmates.

Another infinite pleasure to the little folk was that, for the first year, the farm-house kitchen was made our dining-room. There, through the open door, Edwin's pigeons, Muriel's two doves, and sometimes a stately hen, walked in and out at pleasure. Whether our live stock, brought up in the law of kindness, were as well-trained and well-behaved as our children, I cannot tell ; but certain it is that we never found any harm from this system, necessitated by our early straits at Longfield—this “liberty, fraternity, and equality.”

Those words, in themselves true and lovely, but wrested to such false meaning, whose fatal sound was now dying out of Europe, merged in the equally false and fatal shout of "*Gloire ! gloire !*" remind me of an event which I believe was the first that broke the delicious monotony of our new life.

It was one September morning. Mrs. Halifax, the children, and I were down at the stream, planning a bridge across it, and a sort of picturesque stable, where John's horse might be put up—the mother had steadily resisted the long-tailed grey ponies. For with all the necessary improvements at Longfield, with the large settlement that John insisted upon making on his wife and children, before he would use in his business any portion of her fortune, we found we were by no means so rich as to make any great change in our way of life advisable. And after all, the mother's best luxuries were to see her children merry and strong, her husband's face lightened of its care, and to know he was now placed beyond doubt in the position he had always longed for ; for was he not this very day gone to sign the lease of Enderley Mills ?

Mrs. Halifax had just looked at her watch, and she and I were wondering, with quite a

childish pleasure, if the important deed was safely done, when Guy came running to say a coach-and-four was trying to enter the White Gate.

“Who can it be?—But they must be stopped, or they’ll spoil John’s new gravel road that he takes such pride in. Uncle Phineas, would you mind going to see?”

Who should I see, but almost the last person I expected to see—who had not been beheld, hardly spoken of, in our household these ten years?—Lady Caroline Brithwood, more fashionable than ever, in her travelling-habit of gay-coloured cloth, her velvet riding-hat, with its Prince of Wales’ feathers, though her pretty face was withering under the paint, and her lively manner growing coarse and bold.

“Is this Longfield?—Does Mr. Halifax—*mon Dieu*, Mr. Fletcher, is that you?”

She held out her hand with the frankest condescension, and in the gayest humour in the world. She insisted on sending on the carriage, and accompanying me down to the stream, for a “surprise”—a “scene.”

Mrs. Halifax, seeing the coach drive on, had evidently forgotten all about it. She stood in the little dell which the stream had made, Walter

in her arms—her figure being thrown back, so as to poise the child's weight. Her right hand kept firm hold of Guy, who was paddling bare-foot in the stream; Edwin, the only one of the boys who never gave any trouble, was soberly digging away, beside little Muriel.

The lady clapped her hands. “*Brava ! bravissima !* a charming family picture, Mrs. Halifax.”

“Lady Caroline !”

Ursula left her children, and came to greet her old acquaintance, whom she had never once seen since she was Ursula March. Perhaps that fact touched her, and it was with a kind of involuntary tenderness that she looked into the sickly face, where all the smiles could not hide the wrinkles.

“It is many years since we met; and we are both somewhat altered, cousin Caroline.”

“You are, with those three great boys. The little girl yours also?—Oh, yes, I remember William told me—poor little thing!” And with a certain uneasy awe she turned from our blind Muriel, our child of peace.

“Will you come up to the house? my husband has only ridden over to Enderley; he will be home soon.”

“And glad to see me, I wonder? For I am rather afraid of that husband of yours—eh, Ursula? Yet I should greatly like to stay.”

Ursula laughed, and repeated the welcome. She was so happy herself—she longed to distribute her happiness. They walked, the children following, towards the house.

Under the great walnut-tree, by the sunk fence which guarded the flower-garden from the sheep and cows, Mrs. Halifax stopped and pointed down the green slope of the field, across the valley, to the wooded hills opposite.

“Isn’t it a pretty view?” said Guy, creeping up and touching the stranger’s gown; our children had lived too much in an atmosphere of love to know either shyness or fear.

“Very pretty, my little friend.”

“That’s One-tree Hill. Father is going to take us all a walk there this afternoon.”

“Do you like going walks with your father?”

“Oh, don’t we!” An electric smile ran through the whole circle. It told enough of the blessed home-tale.

Lady Caroline laughed a sharp laugh. “Eh, my dear, I see how things are. You don’t regret having married John Halifax the tanner?”

“Regret!”

“Nay, be not impetuous. I always said he was a noble fellow—so does the earl now. And William—you can’t think what a hero your husband is to William.”

“Lord Ravenel?”

“Ay, my little brother that was—growing a young man now—a frightful bigot, wanting to make our house as Catholic as when two or three of us lost our heads for King James. But he is a good boy—poor William! I had rather not talk about him.”

Ursula inquired courteously if her cousin Richard were well.

“Bah—I suppose he is; he is always well. His late astonishing honesty to Mr. Halifax cost him a fit of gout—*mais n’importe*. If they meet, I suppose all things will be smooth between them?”

“My husband never had any ill-feeling to Mr. Brithwood.”

“I should not bear him an undying enmity if he had. But you see ’tis election time, and the earl wishes to put in a gentleman, a friend of ours, for Kingswell. Mr. Halifax owns some cottages there, eh?”

“Mr. Fletcher does. My husband transacts business——”

“*Tenez ! tenez !*” cried Lady Caroline, stopping her ears. “I don’t understand business ; I only know that they want your husband to be friendly with mine. Is this plain enough ?”

“Certainly : be under no apprehension. Mr. Halifax never bears malice against any one. Was this the reason of your visit, Lady Caroline ?”

“Eh—*mon Dieu !* what would become of us if we were all as straightforward as you, Mistress Ursula ? But it sounds charming—in the country. No, my dear ; I came—nay, I hardly know why. Probably, because I liked to come—my usual reason for most actions. Is that your *salle-à-manger* ? Won’t you ask me to dinner, *ma cousine* ?”

“Of course,” the mother said, though I fancied afterwards the invitation rather weighed upon her mind, probably from the doubt whether or no John would like it. But in little things as in great, she had always this safe trust in him—that conscientiously to do what she felt to be right, was the surest way to be right in her husband’s eyes.

So Lady Caroline was our guest for the day—a novel guest—but she made herself at once familiar and pleasant. Guy, a little gentleman

from his cradle, installed himself her admiring knight attendant everywhere: Edwin brought her to see his pigeons; Walter, with sweet, shy blushes, offered her "a 'ittle f'ower;" and the three, as the greatest of all favours, insisting on escorting her to pay a visit to the beautiful calf not a week old.

Laughing, she followed the boys; telling them how lately in Sicily she had been presented to a week-old prince, son of Louis Philippe the young Duke of Orleans and the Princess Marie-Amelie. "And truly, children, he was not half so pretty as your little calf. Ursula, I am sick of courts sometimes. I would turn shepherdess myself, if we could find a tolerable Arcadia."

"Is there any Arcadia like home?"

"Home!"—Her face expressed the utmost loathing, fear, and scorn. I remembered hearing that the 'Squire since his return from abroad had turned out just like his father; was drunk every day and all day long. "Is your husband altered, Ursula? He must be quite a young man still. Oh, what it is to be young!"

"John looks much older, people say; but I don't see it."

“Arcadia again! Can such things be? especially in England, that paradise of husbands, where the first husband in the realm sets such an illustrious example. How do you stay-at-home British matrons feel towards my friend the Princess of Wales?”

“God help her, and make her as good a woman as she is a wronged and miserable wife,” said Ursula, sadly.

“*Query*, Can a ‘good woman’ be made out of a ‘wronged and miserable wife?’ If so, Mrs. Halifax, you should certainly take out a patent for the manufacture.”

The subject touched too near home. Ursula wisely avoided it, by enquiring if Lady Caroline meant to remain in England.

“*Cela depend.*” She turned suddenly grave. “Your fresh air makes me feel weary. Shall we go in-doors?”

Dinner was ready laid out—a plain meal; since neither the father nor any of us cared for table dainties; but I think if we had lived in a hut, and fed off wooden platters on potatoes and salt, our repast would have been fair and orderly, and our hut the neatest that a hut could be. For the mother of the family had in perfection almost the best

genius a woman can have — the genius of tidiness.

We were not in the least ashamed of our simple dinner-table, where no difference was ever made for anybody. We had little plate, but plenty of snow-white napery and pretty china; and what with the scents of the flower-garden on one side and the green waving of the elm-tree on the other, it was as good as dining out-of-doors.

The boys were still gathered round Lady Caroline, in the little closet off the dining-room where lessons were learnt; Muriel sat as usual on the door-sill, petting one of her doves that used to come and perch on her head and her shoulder of their own accord,—when I heard the child say to herself—

“Father’s coming.”

“Where, darling?”

“Up the farm-yard way. There—he is on the gravel-walk. He has stopped; I daresay it is to pull some of the jessamine that grows over the well. Now, fly away, dove! Father’s here.”

And the next minute a general shout echoed,
“Father’s here!”

He stood in the doorway, lifting one after the other up in his arms; having a kiss and a merry word for all—this good father!

O solemn name, which Deity Himself claims and owns! Happy these children, who in its fullest sense could understand the word “father!” to whom, from the dawn of their little lives, their father was what all fathers should be—the truest representative here on earth of that Father in heaven, who is at once justice, wisdom, and perfect love.

Happy, too—most blessed among women—the woman who gave her children such a father!

Ursula came—for his eye was wandering in search of her—and received the embrace, without which he never left her or returned.

“All rightly settled, John?”

“Quite settled.”

“I am so glad.” With a second kiss, not often bestowed in public, as congratulation. He was going to tell more, when Ursula said, rather hesitatingly—“We have a visitor to-day.”

Lady Caroline came out of her corner, laughing. “You did not expect me, I see. Am I welcome?”

“Any welcome that Mrs. Halifax has given is also mine.”

But John's manner, though polite, was somewhat constrained; and he felt, as it seemed to my observant eye, more surprise than gratification in this incursion on his quiet home. Also I noticed, that when Lady Caroline, in the height of her condescension, would have Muriel close to her at dinner, he involuntarily drew his little daughter to her accustomed place beside himself.

"She always sits here, thank you."

The table-talk was chiefly between the lady and her host; she rarely talked to women when a man was to be had. Conversation veered between the Emperor Napoleon and Lord Wellington, Lord William Bentinck and Sardinian policy, the conjugal squabbles of Carlton House, and the one-absorbing political question of this year—Catholic emancipation.

"You are a staunch supporter of the Bill, my father says. Of course, you aid him in the Kingswell election to-morrow?"

"I can scarcely call it an election," returned John. He had been commenting on it to us that morning rather severely. An election! it was merely a talk in the King's Head parlour, a nomination, and show of hands by some dozen poor labourers, tenants of Mr. Brithwood and

Lord Luxmore who got a few pounds a-piece for their services,—and the thing was done.

“Who is the nominee, Lady Caroline?”

“A young gentleman of small fortune but excellent parts, who returned with us from Naples.”

The lady’s manner being rather more formal than she generally used, John looked up quickly.

“The election being to-morrow, of course his name is no secret?”

“Oh, no! Vermilye. Mr. Gerard Vermilye. Do you know him?”

“I have heard of him.”

As he spoke—either intentionally or no—John looked full at Lady Caroline. She dropped her eyes, and began playing with her bracelets. Both immediately quitted the subject of Kingswell election.

Soon after, we rose from table; and Guy, who had all dinner-time fixed his admiring gaze upon the “pretty lady,” insisted on taking her down the garden and gathering for her a magnificent arum lily, the mother’s favourite lily. I suggested gaining permission first; and was sent to ask the question.

I found John and his wife in serious, even painful conversation.

"Love," he was saying, "I have known it for very long ; but if she had not come here, I would never have grieved you by telling it."

"Perhaps it is not true," cried Ursula warmly. "The world is ready enough to invent cruel falsehoods about us women."

" 'Us women !' Don't say that, Ursula. I will not have my wife named in the same breath with *her*."

"John !"

"I will not, I say. You don't know what it cost me even to see her touch your hand."

"John !"

The soft tone recalled him to his better self.

"Forgive me ! but I would not have the least taint come near this wife of mine. I could not bear to think of her holding intercourse with a light woman—a woman false to her husband."

"I do not believe it. Caroline was foolish, she was never wicked. Listen !—If this were true, how could she be laughing with our children now ? Oh ! John—think—she has no children."

The deep pity passed from Ursula's heart to her husband's. John clasped fondly the two

hands that were laid on his shoulders, as, looking up in his face, the happy wife pleaded silently for one whom all the world knew was so wronged and so unhappy.

“We will wait a little before we judge. Love, you are a better Christian than I.”

All afternoon they both shewed more than courtesy—kindness, to this woman, at whom, as any one out of our retired household would have known, and as John did know well—all the world was already pointing the finger, on account of Mr. Gerard Vermilye. She, on her part, with her chameleon power of seizing and sunning herself in the delight of the moment, was in a state of the highest enjoyment. She turned “shepherdess,” fed the poultry with Edwin, pulled off her jewelled ornaments and gave them to Walter for playthings; nay, she actually washed off her rouge at the spring, and came in with faint natural roses upon her faded cheeks. So happy she seemed, so innocently, childishly happy; that more than once I saw John and Ursula exchange satisfied looks, rejoicing that they had followed after that divine charity which “thinketh no evil.”

After tea we all turned out, as was our wont on summer evenings; the children playing about;

while the father and mother strolled up and down the sloping field-path, arm in arm like lovers, or sometimes he fondly leaning upon her. Thus they would walk and talk together in the twilight, for hours.

Lady Caroline pointed to them. "Look! Adam and Eve modernised; Baucis and Philemon when they were young. *Bon Dieu!* what it is to be young!"

She said this in a gasp, as if wild with terror of the days that were coming upon her—the dark days.

"People are always young," I answered, "who love one another as these do."

"Love! what an old-fashioned word. I hate it! It is so—what would you say in English?—so *déchirant*. I would not cultivate *une grande passion* for the world."

I smiled at the idea of the bond between Mr. and Mrs. Halifax taking the Frenchified character of "*une grande passion*."

"But home-love, married love, love among children and at the fire-side;—you believe in that?"

She turned upon me her beautiful eyes; they had a scared look, like a bird's driven right into the fowler's net.

“ C’est impossible—impossible !”

The word hissed itself out between her shut teeth—“ *impossible.*” Then she walked quickly on, and was her lively self once more.

When the evening closed, and the younger children were gone to bed, she became rather restless about the non-appearance of her coach. At last a lacquey arrived, on foot. She angrily enquired, why a carriage had not been sent for her ?

“ Master didn’t give orders, my lady,” answered the man, somewhat rudely.

Lady Caroline turned pale—with anger or fear—perhaps both.

“ You have not properly answered your mistress’s question,” said Mr. Halifax.

His tone produced a humbler tone in the servant.

“ Master says, sir—begging my lady’s pardon for repeating it—but he says, My lady went out against his will, and she may come home when and how she likes.”

“ My lady ” burst out laughing, and laughed violently and long.

“ Tell him, I will. Be sure you tell him I will. It is the last and the easiest obedience.”

John sent the lacquey out of the room ; and

Ursula said something about “not speaking thus before a servant.”

“Before a servant! Why, my dear, we furnish entertainment for our whole establishment, my husband and I. We are at the Mythe what the Prince Regent and the Princess of Wales are to the country at large. We divide our people between us; I fascinate—he bribes. Ha! ha! Well done, Richard Brithwood! I may come home ‘when and how I like?’ Truly, I’ll use that kind permission.”

Her eyes glittered with an evil fire: her cheeks were hot and red.

“Mrs. Halifax, I shall be thrown on your hospitality for an hour or two longer. Could you send a letter for me?”

“To your husband? Certainly.”

“My husband?—Never!—Yes, to *my husband*.” The first part of the sentence was full of fierce contempt; the latter, smothered, and slowly desperate. “Tell me, Ursula, what constitutes a man one’s husband? Brutality, tyranny—the tyranny which the law sanctions? Or kindness, sympathy, devotion, everything that makes life beautiful—everything that constitutes happiness and——”

“Sin.”

The word in her ear was so low, that she started as if conscience only had uttered it—conscience, to whom only her intents were known.

John came forward, speaking gravely but not unkindly. “Lady Caroline, I am deeply grieved that this should have happened in my house, and through your visiting us against your husband’s will.”

“His will?”

“Pardon me; but I think a wife is bound to the very last to obey in all things not absolutely wrong, her husband’s will. I am glad you thought of writing to Mr. Brithwood.”

She shook her head, in mocking denial.

“May I ask then—since I am to have the honour of sending it—to whom is this letter?”

“To——” I think she would have told a falsehood, if John’s eyes had not been so keenly fixed upon her. “To—a friend.”

“Friends are at all times dangerous to a lady who——”

“Hates her husband—ha! ha! Especially male friends?”

“Especially male friends.”

Here Guy, who had lingered out of his little bed most unlawfully—hovering about, ready to do any chivalrous duty to his idol of the day—

came up to bid her good night, and held up his rosy mouth, eagerly.

“I—kiss a little child! I!”—and from her violent laughter, she burst into a passion of tears.

The mother signed me to carry Guy away; she and John took Lady Caroline into the parlour, and shut the door.

Of course, I did not then learn what passed—but I did afterwards.

Lady Caroline’s tears were evanescent, like all her emotions. Soon she became composed—asked again for writing materials—then countermanded the request.

“No, I will wait till to-morrow. Ursula, you will take me in for the night?”

Mrs. Halifax looked appealingly to her husband, but he gave no assent.

“Lady Caroline, you should willingly stay, were it not, as you must know, so fatal a step. In your position, you should be most careful to leave the world and your husband no single handle against you.”

“Mr. Halifax, what right have you—”

“None, save that of an honest man, who sees a woman cruelly wronged, and desperate

with her wrong; who would thankfully save her if he could."

"Save me? From what—or whom?"

"From Mr. Gerald Vermilye, who is now waiting down the road, and whom, if Lady Caroline Brithwood once flies to, or even sees, at this crisis, she loses her place among honourable English matrons for ever."

John said this, with no air of virtuous anger or contempt, but as the simple statement of a fact. The convicted woman dropped her face between her hands.

Ursula, greatly shocked, was some time before she spoke.

"Is it true, Caroline?"

"What is true?"

"That which my husband has heard of you?"

"Yes," she cried, springing up, and dashing back her beautiful hair—beautiful still, though she must have been five or six and thirty at least—"Yes, it is true—it shall be true. I will break my bonds, and live the life I was made for. I would have done it long ago, but for—no matter. Why, Ursula, he adores me; young and handsome as he is, he adores me. He will give me my youth back again, ay, he will."

And she sang out a French chanson, something about "*la liberté et ses plaisirs, la jeunesse, l'amour.*"

The mother grew sterner—any such wife and mother would. Then and there, compassion might have died out of even her good heart, had it not been for the sudden noise over-head of children's feet—children's chattering. Once more the pitiful thought came—"She has no children."

"Caroline," she said, catching her gown as she passed, "when I was staying with you, you had a child which only breathed and died. It died spotless. When you die, how dare you meet that little baby?"

The singing changed to sobbing. "I had forgotten. My little baby! Oh, *mon Dieu, mon Dieu!*"

Mrs. Halifax, taking in earnest those meaningless French ejaculations, whispered something about Him who alone can comfort and help us all.

"Him? I never knew Him, if indeed He be. No, no, there is no after-life. Nature is the only God."

Ursula turned away in horror. "John, what

shall we do with her? No home!—no husband!—no God!”

“He never leaves Himself without a witness. Look, love.”

The wretched woman sat rocking to and fro—weeping and wringing her hands. “It was cruel—cruel! You should not have spoken about my baby. I might have lived innocent if I had kept my little baby. Now—”

“Tell me—just one word—I will not believe anybody’s word except your own. Caroline, are you—still innocent?”

Lady Caroline shrank from her touch. “Don’t hold me so. You may have one standard of virtue, I another.”

“Still, tell me.”

“And if I did, you, an ‘honourable English matron’—was not that your husband’s word?—would turn from me, most likely?”

“She will not. She has been happy, and you most miserable.”

“Oh, most miserable.”

That bitter groan went to both their hearts. Ursula leaned over her—herself almost in tears. “Cousin Caroline, John says true—I will not turn from you. I know you have been sinned

against—cruelly—cruelly. Only tell me that you yourself have not sinned.”

“I have ‘sinned,’ as you call it.”

Ursula started—drew closer to her husband. Neither spoke.

“Mrs. Halifax, why don’t you take away your hand?”

“I?—Let me think. This is terrible. Oh, John!”

Again Lady Caroline said, in her sharp, bold tone, “Take away your hand.”

“Husband, shall I?”

“No.”

For some minutes they stood together, both silent, over this poor woman. I call her “poor,” as did they; knowing, that if a sufferer needs pity, how tenfold more does a sinner!

John spoke first. “Cousin Caroline.” She lifted up her head in amazement. “We are your cousins, and we wish to be your friends, my wife and I. Will you listen to us?”

She sobbed still, but less violently.

“Only, first—you must promise to renounce for ever, this sin—this disgrace.”

“I feel it none. He is an honourable gentleman—he loves me, and I love him. That is

the true marriage. No, I will make you no such promise. Let me go."

"Pardon me—not yet. I cannot suffer my wife's kinswoman to elope from my own house, without trying to prevent it."

"Prevent!—Sir!—Mr. Halifax! You forget who you are, and who I am—the daughter of the Earl of Luxmore."

"Were you the King's daughter, it would make no difference. I will save you in spite of yourself, if I can. I have already spoken to Mr. Vermilye, and he has gone away."

"Gone away! the only living soul that loves me. Gone away! I must follow him—quick—quick."

"You cannot. He is miles distant by this time. He is afraid lest this story should come out to-morrow at Kingswell; and to be an M.P. and safe from arrest is better to Mr. Vermilye than even yourself, Lady Caroline."

John's wife, unaccustomed to hear him take that cool, worldly, half-sarcastic tone, turned to him somewhat reproachfully; but he judged best. For the moment, this tone had more weight with the woman of the world than any homilies. She began to be afraid of Mr. Hali-

fax. Impulse, rather than resolution, guided her, and even these impulses were feeble and easily governed. She sat down again, muttering,

“My will is free. You cannot control me.”

“Only so far as my conscience justifies me in preventing a crime.”

“A crime?”

“It would be such. No sophistries of French philosophy on your part—no cruelty on your husband’s, can abrogate the one law, which if you disown it as God’s, is still man’s—being necessary for the peace, honour, and safety of society.”

“What law?”

“*Thou shalt not commit adultery.*”

People do not often utter this plain Bible word. It made Ursula start, even when spoken solemnly by her own husband. It tore from the self-convicted woman all the sentimental disguises with which the world then hid, and hides—its corruptions. Her sin arose and stared her blackly in the face—as *sin*. She cowered before it.

“Am I—*that*? And William will know it. Poor William!” She looked up at Ursula—for the first time with the guilty look; hitherto, it had been only one of pain or despair. “Nobody

knows it, except you. Don't tell William. I would have gone long ago, but for him. He is a good boy ;—don't let him guess his sister was—”

She left the word unspoken. Shame seemed to crush her down to the earth ; shame, the precursor of saving penitence—at least, John thought so. He quitted the room, leaving her to the ministry of his other self, his wife. As he sat down with me, and told me in a few words what indeed I had already more than half guessed, I could not but notice the expression of his face. And I recognized how a man can be at once righteous to judge, tender to pity, and strong to save ; a man, the principle of whose life is, as John's was—that it should be made “conformable to the image” of Him, who was Himself the earthly image of God.

Ursula came out and called her husband. They talked for some time together. I guessed, from what I heard, that she wished Lady Caroline to stay the night here, but that he with better judgment was urging the necessity of her returning to the protection of her husband's home without an hour's delay.

“It is her only chance of saving her reputation. She must do it, Ursula.”

After a few minutes, Mrs. Halifax came out again.

"I have persuaded her at last. She says she will do whatever you think best. Only, husband, before she goes, she wants to look at the children. May she?"

"Poor soul!—yes," he murmured, turning away.

Stepping out of sight, we saw the poor lady pass through the quiet, empty house into the children's bed-room. We heard her smothered sob, at times, the whole way.

Then I went down to the stream, and helped John to saddle his horse, with Mrs. Halifax's old saddle—in her girlish days Ursula used to be very fond of riding.

"She can ride back again from the Mythe," said John. "She wishes to go, and it is best she should; so that nothing need be said, except that Lady Caroline spent a day at Longfield, and that my wife and I accompanied her safe home."

While he spoke, the two ladies came down the field-path. I fancied I heard, even now, a faint echo of that peculiarly sweet and careless laugh, indicating how light were all impressions on a temperament so plastic and weak—how easily re-

moulded by the very next influence that fate threw across her perilous way.

John Halifax assisted her on horseback, took the bridle under one arm and gave the other to his wife. Thus they passed up the path, and out at the White Gate.

I delayed a little while, listening to the wind, and to the prattle of the stream, that went singing along in daylight or in darkness, by our happy home at Longfield. And I sighed to myself, "Poor Lady Caroline!"

CHAPTER IX.

MIDNIGHT though it was, I sat up until John and his wife came home. They said scarcely anything, but straightway retired. In the morning, all went on in the house as usual, and no one ever knew of this night's episode, except us three.

In the morning Guy looked wistfully around him, asking for the "pretty lady;" and being told that she was gone and that he would not be likely to see her again, seemed disappointed for a minute; but soon he went down to play at the stream, and forgot all.

Once or twice I fancied the mother's clear voice about the house was rarer than its wont; that her quick, active, cheerful presence, penetrating every nook and visiting every creature as with the freshness of an April wind, was this

day softer and sadder ; but she did not say anything to me, nor I to her.

John had ridden off early ; to the flour-mill, which he still kept on, together with the house at Norton Bury—he always disliked giving up any old associations. At dinner-time he came home, saying he was going out again immediately.

Ursula looked uneasy. A few minutes after, she followed me under the walnut-tree, where I was sitting with Muriel, and asked me if I would go with John to Kingswell ?

“The election takes place to-day, and he thinks it right to be there. He will meet Mr. Brithwood and Lord Luxmore ; and though there is not the slightest need—my husband can do all that he has to do alone—still, for my own satisfaction, I would like his brother to be near him.”

They invariably called me their brother now ; and it seemed as if the name had been mine by right of blood always.

Of course I went to Kingswell, riding John's brown mare, he himself walking by my side. It was not often that we were thus alone together, and I enjoyed it much. All the old days seemed to come back again as we passed

along the quiet roads and green lanes, just as when we were boys together, when I had none I cared for but David, and David cared only for me. The natural growth of things had made a difference in this, but our affection had changed its outward form only, not its essence. I often think that all loves and friendships need a certain three-days' burial before we can be quite sure of their truth and their immortality. Mine—it happened just after John's marriage, and I may confess it now—had likewise its entombment, bitter as brief. Many cruel hours sat I in darkness, weeping at the door of its sepulchre, thinking I should never see it again; but, in the dawn of the morning, it rose, and I met it in the desolate garden, different, yet the very same. And after that, it walked with me continually, secure and imperishable evermore.

I rode, and John sauntered beside me along the footpath, now and then plucking a leaf or branch off the hedge and playing with it, as was his habit when a lad. Often, I caught the old smile—not one of his three boys, not even handsome Guy, had their father's smile.

He was telling me about Enderley Mill, and all his plans there, in the which he seemed very happy. At last, his long life of duty was merg-

ing into the life he loved. He looked as proud and pleased as a boy, in talking of the new inventions he meant to apply in cloth-weaving; and how he and his wife had agreed together to live for some years to come at little Longfield, strictly within their settled income, that all the remainder of his capital might go to the improvement of Enderley Mills and mill-people.

“I shall be master of nearly a hundred, men and women. Think what good one may do! She has half-a-dozen plans on foot already—bless her dear heart!”

It was easy to guess whom he referred to—the one who went hand-in-hand with him in everything.

“Was the dinner in the barn, next Monday, her plan too?”

“Why, not exactly. I thought we would begin a sort of yearly festival for the old tanyard people, and those about the flour-mill, and the Kingswell tenants—ah, Phineas, wasn’t I right about those Kingswell folk?”

These were about a dozen poor families, whom, when our mortgage fell in, he had lured out of Sally Watkins’ miserable alley to these old houses, where they had at least fresh country air and

space enough to live wholesomely and decently, instead of herding together like pigs in a sty.

“You ought to be proud of your tenants, Phineas. I assure you, they form quite a contrast to their neighbours, who are Lord Luxmore’s.”

“And his voters likewise, I suppose?—the ‘free and independent burgesses’ who are to send Mr. Vermilye to parliament?”

“If they can,” said John, biting his lip with that resolute half-combative air which I now saw in him at times, roused by things which continually met him in his dealings with the world—things repugnant alike to his feelings and his principles, but which he had still to endure, not having risen high enough to oppose, single-handed, the great mass of social corruption which at this crisis of English history kept gathering and gathering, until out of the very horror and loathsomeness of it, an outcry for purification arose.

“Do you know, Phineas, I might last week have sold your houses for double price? They are valuable, this election year, since your five tenants are the only voters in Kingswell who are not likewise tenants of Lord Luxmore. Don’t you see how the matter stands?”

It was not difficult, for that sort of game was played all over England, connived at, or at least winked at, by those who had political influence to sell or obtain, until the Reform Bill opened up the election system in all its rottenness and enormity.

“Of course, I knew you would not sell your houses ; and I shall use every possible influence I have to prevent your tenants selling their votes. Whatever may be the consequence, the sort of thing that this Kingswell election bids fair to be, is what any honest Englishman ought to set his face against, and prevent if he can.”

“Can you ?”

“I do not feel sure, but I mean to try. First, for simple right and conscience ; secondly, because if Mr. Vermilye is not saved from arrest by being placed in Parliament, he will be outlawed and driven safe out of the country. You see ?”

Ay, I did, only too well. Though I foresaw that whatever John was about to do, it must necessarily be something that would run directly counter to Lord Luxmore,—and he had only just signed the lease of Enderley Mills ! Still, if right to be done—he ought to do it at all risks, at all costs ; and I knew his wife would say so.

We came to the foot of Kingswell Hill, and saw the little hamlet—with its grey old houses, its small, ancient church, guarded by enormous yew-trees, and clothed with ivy that indicated centuries of growth.

A carriage overtook us here ; in it were two gentlemen, one of whom bowed in a friendly manner to John. He returned it.

“That is well ; I shall have one honest gentleman to deal with to-day.”

“Who is he ?”

“Sir Ralph Oldtower, from whom I bought Longfield. An excellent man—I like him—even his fine old Norman face, like one of his knightly ancestors on the tomb in Kingswell church. There’s something pleasant about his stiff courtesy and his staunch Toryism ; for he fully believes in it, and acts up to his belief. A true English gentleman, and I respect him.”

“Yet, John, Norton Bury calls you a democrat.”

“So I am, for I belong to the people. But I nevertheless uphold a true aristocracy—the *best men* of the country—do you remember our Greek of old ? These ought to govern, and will govern, one day, whether their patent of

nobility be birth and titles, or only honesty and brains."

Thus he talked on, and I liked to hear him, for talking was rare in his busy life of constant action. I liked to observe how during these ten years his mind had brooded over many things; how it had grown, strengthened, and settled itself, enlarging both its vision and its aspirations; as a man does, who, his heart at rest in a happy home, has time and will to look out from thence into the troublous world outside, ready to do his work there likewise. That John was able to do it—ay, beyond most men—few would doubt who looked into his face; strong with the strength of an intellect which owed all its development to himself alone; calm with the wisdom which, if a man ever is to be wise, comes to him after he has crossed the line of thirty years. In that face, where day by day Time was writing its fit lessons—beautiful, because they were so fit—I ceased to miss the boyish grace, and rejoiced in the manhood present, in the old age that was to be.

It seemed almost too short a journey, when, putting his hand on the mare's bridle—the creature loved him, and turned to lick his arm the minute he came near—John stopped me to

see the view from across Kingswell church yard.

"Look, what a broad valley, rich in woods and meadow-land and corn. How quiet and blue lie the Welsh hills far away. It does one good to look at them. Nay, it brings back a little bit of me which rarely comes uppermost now, as it used to come long ago, when we read your namesake, and Shakspeare, and that Anonymous Friend who has since made such a noise in the world. I delight in him still. Think of a man of business liking Coleridge."

"I don't see why he should not."

"Nor I. Well—my poetic tastes may come out more at Enderley. Or perhaps when I am an old man, and have fought the good fight, and—Holloa, there! Matthew Hales, have they made you drunk already?"

The man—he was an old workman of ours—touched his hat, and tried to walk steadily past "the master," who looked at once both stern and sad.

"I thought it would be so!—I doubt if there is a voter in all Kingswell who has not got a bribe."

"It is the same everywhere," I said. "What can one man do against it, single-handed?"

"Single-handed or not, every man ought to

do what he can. And no man knows how much he can do till he tries,"

So saying, he went in to the large parlour of the Luxmore Arms, where the election was going on.

A very simple thing, that election! Sir Ralph Oldtower, who was sheriff, sat at a table, with his son, the grave-looking young man who had been with him in the carriage; near them were Mr. Brithwood of the Mythe, and the Earl of Luxmore.

The room was pretty well filled with farmers' labourers and the like. We entered, making little noise; but John's head was taller than most heads present; the sheriff saw him at once, and bowed courteously. So did young Mr. Herbert Oldtower, so did the Earl of Luxmore. Richard Brithwood alone took no notice, but turned his back and looked another way.

It was now many years since I had seen the Squire, Lady Caroline's husband. He had fulfilled the promise of his youth, and grown into a bloated, coarse-featured, middle-aged man; such a man as one rarely meets with now-a-days; for even I, Phineas Fletcher, have lived to see so great a change in manners and morals, that intemperance, instead of being the usual

characteristic of a "gentleman," has become a rare failing, a universally-contemned disgrace.

"Less noise there!" growled Mr. Brithwood. "Silence, you fellows at the door! Now, Sir Ralph, let's get the business over, and be back for dinner."

Sir Ralph turned his stately grey head to the light, put on his gold spectacles, and began to read the writ of election. As he finished, the small audience set up a feeble cheer.

The sheriff acknowledged it, then leaned over the table, talking with rather frosty civility to Lord Luxmore. Their acquaintance seemed solely that of business. People whispered that Sir Ralph never forgot that the Oldtowers were Crusaders when the Ravenels were—nobody. Also, the baronet, whose ancestors were all honourable men and stainless women, found it hard to overlook a certain royal bar-sinister, which had originated the Luxmore earldom, together with a few other blots which had tarnished that scutcheon since. So folk said; but probably Sir Ralph's high principle was at least as strong as his pride, and that the real cause of his dislike was founded on the too well known character of the Earl of Luxmore.

They ceased talking; the sheriff rose, and briefly stated that Richard Brithwood, Esquire, of the Mythe, would nominate a candidate.

The candidate was Gerard Vermilye, Esquire; at the mention of whose name one Norton Bury man broke into a horse laugh, which was quenched by his immediate ejection from the meeting.

Then, Mr. Thomas Brown, steward of the Earl of Luxmore, seconded the nomination.

After a few words between the sheriff, his son, and Lord Luxmore, the result of which seemed rather unsatisfactory than otherwise, Sir Ralph Oldtower again rose.

"Gentlemen and electors, there being no other candidate proposed, nothing is left me but to declare Gerard Vermilye, Esquire——"

John Halifax made his way to the table. "Sir Ralph, pardon my interruption, but may I speak a few words?"

Mr. Brithwood started up with an angry oath.

"My good sir," said the baronet, with a look of reprehension which proved him of the minority who thought swearing ungentlemanly.

"By ——, Sir Ralph, you shall not hear that low fellow!"

"Excuse me, I must, if he has a right to be heard. Mr. Halifax, are you a freeman of Kingswell?"

"I am."

This fact surprised none more than myself.

Brithwood furiously exclaimed that it was a falsehood. "The fellow does not belong to this neighbourhood at all. He was picked up in Norton Bury streets—a beggar, a thief, for all I know."

"You do know very well, Mr. Brithwood. Sir Ralph, I was never either a beggar or a thief. I began life as a working lad—a farm-labourer—until Mr. Fletcher the tanner took me into his employ."

"So I have always understood," said Sir Ralph, courteously. "And next to the man who is fortunate enough to boast a noble origin, I respect the man who is not ashamed of an ignoble one."

"That is not exactly my position either," said John, with a half smile. "But we are passing from the question in hand, which is simply my claim to be a freeman of this borough."

"On what grounds?"

"You will find in the charter, a clause, seldom

put in force, that the daughter of a freeman has a right to confer the freedom on her husband. My wife's late father, Mr. Henry March, was a burgess of Kingswell. Ask your clerk, Sir Ralph, if I have not spoken correctly."

The old white-headed clerk allowed the fact.

Lord Luxmore looked considerably surprised, and politely incredulous still. His son-in-law broke out into loud abuse of this "knavery."

"I will pass over that ugly word, Mr. Brithwood, merely stating that I have been aware of my rights for two years, though I have never urged them, and should not now, except——"

"We are quite satisfied," interrupted Lord Luxmore, blandly. "My dear sir, may I request so useful a vote and so powerful an interest as yours, for our friend Mr. Vermilye?"

"My lord, I should be very sorry for you to misapprehend me for a moment. It is not my intention, except at the last extremity, to vote at all. If I do, it will certainly not be for Mr. Brithwood's nominee. Sir Ralph, I doubt if, under some circumstances, which by your permission I am about to state, Mr. Gerard Vermilye can keep his seat, even if elected."

A murmur arose from the crowd of mechanics and labourers, who, awed by such pro-

pinquity to gentry and even nobility, had hitherto hung sheepishly back ; but now, like all English crowds, were quite ready to “ follow the leader,” especially one they knew.

“ Hear him ! hear the master !” was distinguishable on all sides. Mr. Brithwood looked too enraged for words ; but Lord Luxmore, taking snuff with a sarcastic smile, said,

“ *Honores mutant mores !*—I thought, Mr. Halifax, you eschewed politics ?”

“ Mere politics I do, but not honesty, justice, morality ; and a few facts have reached my knowledge, though possibly not Lord Luxmore’s, which make me feel that Mr. Vermilye’s election would be an insult to all three ; therefore I oppose it.”

A louder murmur rose.

“ Silence, you scoundrels !” shouted Mr. Brithwood ; adding his usual formula of speech, which a second time extorted the old Baronet’s grave rebuke.

“ It seems, Sir Ralph, that democracy is rife in your neighbourhood. True, my acquaintance has not lain much among the commonalty, but still I was not aware that the people choose the member of parliament.”

“ They do not, Lord Luxmore,” returned the

sheriff, somewhat haughtily. "But we always hear the people. Mr. Halifax, be brief: what have you to allege against Mr. Brithwood's nominee?"

"First, his qualification. He has not three hundred, nor one hundred a year. He is deeply in debt, at Norton Bury and elsewhere. Warrants are out against him; and only as an M.P. can he be safe from outlawry. Add to this, an offence common as daylight, yet which the law dare not wink at when made patent—that he has bribed, with great or small sums, every one of the fifteen electors of Kingswell; and I think I have said enough to convince any honest Englishman that Mr. Gerard Vermilye is not fit to represent them in Parliament."

Here a loud cheer broke from the crowd at the door and under the open windows, where, thick as bees, the villagers had now collected. They—the un-voting, and consequently unbribeable portion of the community—began to hiss indignantly at the fifteen unlucky voters. For though bribery was, as John had truly said, "as common as daylight," still, if brought openly before the public, the said honest public generally condemned it, if they themselves had not been concerned therein.

The sheriff listened uneasily to a sound, very uncommon at elections, of the populace expressing an opinion contrary to that of the lord of the soil.

“Really, Mr. Brithwood, you must have been as ignorant as I was of the character of your nominee, or you would have chosen some one else. Herbert,”—he turned to his son, who, until the late dissolution, had sat for some years as member for Norton Bury—“Herbert, are you acquainted with any of these facts?”

Mr. Herbert Oldtower looked uncomfortable.

“Answer,” said his father. “No hesitation in a matter of right and wrong. Gentlemen, and my honest friends, will you hear Mr. Oldtower, whom you all know? Herbert, are these accusations true?”

“I am afraid so,” said the grave young man, more gravely.

“Mr. Brithwood, I regret extremely that this discovery was not made before. What do you purpose doing?”

“By the Lord that made me, nothing! The borough is Lord Luxmore’s; I could nominate Satan himself if I chose. My man shall stand.”

“I think,” Lord Luxmore said, with mean-

ing, "it would be better for all parties that Mr. Vermilye should stand."

"My lord," said the baronet; and one could see that not only rigid justice, but a certain obstinacy, marked his character, especially when anything jarred against his personal dignity or prejudices; "you forget that, however desirous I am to satisfy the family to whom this borough belongs, it is impossible for me to see with satisfaction the election of any person unfit to serve his Majesty. If indeed there were another candidate, so that the popular feeling might decide this very difficult matter—"

"Sir Ralph," said John Halifax, determinedly, "this brings me to the purpose for which I spoke. Being a landholder, and likewise a freeman of this borough, I claim the right of nominating a second candidate."

Intense, overwhelming astonishment struck all present. Such a right had been so long unclaimed, that everybody had forgotten it was a right at all. Sir Ralph and his clerk laid their venerable heads together for some minutes before they could come to any conclusion on the subject. At last the sheriff rose.

"I am bound to say—that though very uncommon, this proceeding is not illegal."

“Not illegal?” almost screamed Richard Brithwood.

“Not illegal. I therefore wait to hear Mr. Halifax’s nomination. Sir, your candidate is, I hope, no democrat?”

“His political opinions differ from mine, but he is the only gentleman whom I in this emergency can name; and is one whom myself, and I believe all my neighbours, will be heartily glad to see once more in parliament. I beg to nominate Mr. Herbert Oldtower.”

A decided sensation at the upper half of the room. At the lower half an unanimous, involuntary cheer; for among our county families there were few so warmly respected as the Oldtowers.

Sir Ralph rose, much perplexed. “I trust that no one present will suppose I was aware of Mr. Halifax’s intention. Nor, I understand, was Mr. Oldtower. My son must speak for himself.”

Mr. Oldtower, with his accustomed gravity, accompanied by a not unbecoming modesty, said, that in this conjuncture, and being personally unacquainted with both Mr. Brithwood and the Earl of Luxmore, he felt no hesitation in accepting the honour offered to him.

"That being the case," said his father, though evidently annoyed, "I have only to fulfil my duty as public officer of the crown."

Amidst some confusion, a show of hands was called for; and then a cry rose of "Go to the poll!"

"Go to the poll!" shouted Mr. Brithwood. "This is a family borough. There has not been a poll here these fifty years. Sir Ralph, your son's mad."

"Sir, insanity is not in the family of the Old-towers. My position here is simply as sheriff of the county. If a poll be called for—"

"Excuse me, Sir Ralph, it would hardly be worth your while. May I offer you—"

It was—only his snuff-box. But the Earl's polite and meaning smile filled up the remainder of the sentence.

Sir Ralph Oldtower drew himself up haughtily, and the fire of youth flashed indignantly from his grand old eyes.

"Lord Luxmore seems not to understand the duties and principles of us country gentlemen," he said coldly, and turned away, addressing the general meeting. "Gentlemen, the poll will be held this afternoon, according to the suggestion of my neighbour here."

“Sir Ralph Oldtower has convenient neighbours,” remarked Lord Luxmore.

“Of my neighbour, Mr. Halifax,” repeated the old baronet, louder, and more emphatically. “A gentleman,”—he paused, as if doubtful whether in that title he were awarding a right or bestowing a courtesy, looked at John, and decided—“a gentleman for whom, ever since I have known him, I have entertained the highest respect.”

It was the first public recognition of the position which for some time had been tacitly given to John Halifax in his own neighbourhood. Coming thus, from this upright and honourable old man, whose least merit it was to hold, and worthily, a baronetage four centuries old; it made John’s cheek glow with an honest gratification, and a pardonable pride.

“Tell her,” he said to me, when, the meeting having dispersed, he asked me to ride home and explain the reason of his detention at Kingswell—“Tell my wife all. She will be pleased, you know.”

Ay, she was. Her face glowed and brightened as only a wife’s can—a wife whose dearest pride is in her husband’s honour.

Nevertheless, she hurried me back again as quickly as I came.

As I once more rode up Kingswell hill, it seemed as if the whole parish were agog to see the novel sight. A contested election ! truly, such a thing had not been known within the memory of the oldest inhabitant. The fifteen voters—I believe that was the number—were altogether bewildered by a sense of their own importance. Also, by a new and startling fact—which I found Mr. Halifax trying to impress upon a few of them, gathered under the great yew-tree in the churchyard—that a man's vote ought to be the expression of his own conscientious opinion ; and that for him to sell it was scarcely less vile than to traffic in the liberty of his son, or the honour of his daughter. Among those who listened most earnestly, was a man who I had before seen to-day—Jacob Baines, once the ringleader of the bread-riots, who had long worked steadily in the tan-yard, and then at the flour-mill. He was the honestest and faithfulest of all John's people—illustrating unconsciously that Divine doctrine, that, often, they love most to whom most has been forgiven.

The poll was to be held in the church—a not

uncommon usage in country boroughs, but which from its rarity struck great awe into the Kingswell folk. The churchwarden was placed in the clerk's desk, to receive votes. Not far off, the sheriff sat in his family-pew, bare-headed; by his grave and reverent manner imposing due decorum, which was carefully observed by all except Lord Luxmore and Mr. Brithwood.

These two, apparently sure of their cause, had recovered their spirits, and talked and laughed loudly on the other side of the church. It was a very small building, narrow and cruciform; every word said in it was distinctly audible throughout.

"My lord, gentlemen, and my friends all," said Sir Ralph, rising gravely, "let me hope that every one will respect the sanctity of this place."

Lord Luxmore, who had been going about with his dazzling diamond snuff-box and equally dazzling smile, stopped in the middle of the aisle, bowed, replied, "With pleasure—certainly!" and walked inside the communion-rail, as if believing that his presence there conveyed the highest compliment he could pay.

The poll began in perfect silence. One after the other, three farmers went up and voted for

Mr. Vermilye. There was snuff under their noses—probably something heavier than snuff in their pockets.

Then came up the big, grey-headed fellow I have before mentioned — Jacob Baines. He pulled his fore-lock to Sir Ralph, rather shyly; possibly in his youth he had made the sheriff's acquaintance under less favourable circumstances. But he plucked up courage.

"Your honour, might a man say a word to 'ee?"

"Certainly! but be quick, my good fellow," replied the baronet, who was noted for his kindly manner to humble folk.

"Sir, I be a poor man. I lives in one o' my lord's houses. I hanna paid no rent for a year. Mr. Brown zays to me, he zays—'Jacob, vote for Vermilye, and I'll forgive 'ee the rent, and here be two pound ten to start again wi'.' So, as I zays to Matthew Hales, (he be Mr. Halifax's tenant, your honour, and my lord's steward ha' paid 'un nigh four pound for his vote), I sure us be poor men, and his lordship a lord and all that—it's no harm, I reckon."

"Holloa! cut it short, you rascal; you're stopping the poll. Vote, I say."

"Ay, ay, 'squire;" and the old fellow, who

had some humour in him, pulled his hair again civilly to Mr. Brithwood. "Wait till I ha' got shut o' these."

And he counted out of his ragged pockets a handful of guineas. Poor fellow! how bright they looked; those guineas, that were food, clothing, life.

"Three was paid to I, two to Will Horrocks, and the rest to Matthew Hales. But, sir, we has changed our minds; and please, would'ee give back the money to them as owns it?"

"Still, my honest friend—"

"Thank'ee, Sir Ralph—that's it: we be honest; we couldn't look the master in the face else. Twelve year ago, come Michaelmas, he kept some on us from starving—may be worse. We bean't going to turn rascals on's hands now. Now I'll vote, Sir,—and it won't be for Vermilye."

A smothered murmur of applause greeted old Jacob, as he marched back down the aisle, where on the stone benches of the porch was seated a rural jury, who discussed not over-favourably the merits of Lord Luxmore's candidate.

"He owes a power o' money in Norton Bury—he do."

"Why doesn't he shew his face at the 'lection, like a decent gentleman?"

“Feard o’ bailiffs !” suggested the one constable, old and rheumatic, who guarded the peace of Kingswell. “He’s the biggest swindler in all England.”

“Curse him!” muttered an old woman. “She were a bonny lass—my Sally ! Curse him !”

All this while, Lord Luxmore sat in lazy dignity on the communion chair, apparently satisfied that as things always had been so they would continue to be ; that, despite the unheard-of absurdity of a contested election, his pocket borough was quite secure. It must have been to say the least a great surprise to his lordship, when, the poll being closed, its result was found thus : Out of the fifteen votes, six were for Mr. Vermilye, nine for his opponent. Mr. Herbert Oldtower was therefore declared duly elected as member for the borough of Kingswell.

The earl received the announcement with dignified, incredulous silence ; but Mr. Brithwood never spared language.

“It’s a cheat—an infamous conspiracy ! I will unseat him—by my soul I will !”

“You may find it difficult,” said John Halifax, counting out the guineas deposited by Jacob Baines, and laying them in a little heap before Mr. Brown, the steward. “Small as the number

was, I believe any committee of the House of Commons will decide that nine honest votes were never polled. But I regret, my Lord—I regret deeply, Mr. Brithwood,”—and there was a kind of pity in his eye—“that in this matter I have been forced as it were, to become your opponent. Some day perhaps, you may both do me the justice that I now can only look for from my own conscience.”

“Very possibly,” replied the earl, with a satirical bow. “I believe, gentlemen, our business is ended for to-day, and it is a long drive to Norton Bury. Sir Ralph, might we hope for the honour of your company? No? Good day, my friends, Mr. Halifax, your servant.”

“One word, my lord. Those workmen of mine, who are your tenants—I am aware what usually results when tenants in arrear vote against their landlords—if, without taking any harsher measures, your agent will be so kind as to apply to me for the rent—”

“Sir, my agent will use his own discretion.”

“Then I rely on your lordship’s kindness—your sense of honour.”

“Honour is only spoken of between equals,” said the earl, haughtily. “But on one thing

Mr. Halifax may always rely — my excellent memory.”

With a smile and bow as perfect as if he were victoriously quitting the field, Lord Luxmore departed. Soon not one remained of all those who had filled the church and churchyard, making there a tumult that is chronicled to this very day by some ancient villagers, who still think themselves greatly ill-used because the Reform Act has blotted out of the list of English boroughs the “loyal and independent” borough of Kingswell.

Sir Ralph Oldtower stood a good while talking with John; and finally, having sent his carriage on, walked with him down Kingswell Hill towards the manor-house. I, riding alongside, caught fragments of their conversation.

“What you say is all true, Mr. Halifax; and you say it well. But what can we do? Our English constitution is perfect—that is, as perfect as anything human can be. Yet corruptions will arise; we regret, we even blame—but we cannot remove them. It is impossible.”

“Do you think, Sir Ralph, that the Maker of this world—which, so far as we can see, He means like all other of His creations gradually to advance toward perfection—do you think He

would justify us in pronouncing any good work therein, ‘impossible?’”

“You talk like a young man,” said the baronet, half sadly. “Coming years will shew you the world, and the ways of it, in a clearer light.”

“I earnestly hope so.”

Sir Ralph glanced sideways at him—perhaps with a sort of envy of the very youth which he thus charitably excused as a thing to be allowed for till riper wisdom came. Something might have smote the old man with a conviction, that in this youth was strength and life, the spirit of the new generation then arising, before which the old worn-out generation would crumble into its natural dust. Dust of the dead ages, honourable dust, to be reverently inurned, and never parritchally profaned by us the living age, who in our turn must follow the same downward path. Dust, venerable and beloved—but still only dust.

The conversation ending, we took our diverse ways; Sir Ralph giving Mr. Halifax a hearty invitation to the manor-house, seeing him hesitate, and adding, with true instinct, that “Lady Oldtower would shortly have the honour of calling upon Mrs. Halifax.”

John bowed. "But I ought to tell you, Sir Ralph, that my wife and I are very simple people—that we make no mere acquaintances, and only desire friends."

"It is fortunate, that Lady Oldtower and myself share the same peculiarity." And, shaking hands with a stately cordiality, the old man took his leave.

"John, you have made a step in the world to-day."

"Have I?" he said absently, walking in deep thought, and pulling the hedge-leaves as he went along.

"What will your wife say?"

"My wife? bless her!" and he seemed to be only speaking the conclusion of his thinking. "It will make no difference to her—though it might to me. She married me in my low estate—but some day, God willing, no lady in the land shall be higher than my Ursula."

Thus as in all things each thought most of the other, and both of Him—whose will was to them beyond all human love, ay, even such love as theirs.

Slowly, slowly, I watched the grey turrets of the manor-house fade away in the dusk; the hills grew indistinct, and suddenly we saw the

little twinkling light that we knew was the lamp in Longfield parlour, shine out like a glow-worm across the misty fields.

“I wonder if the children are gone to bed, Phineas.”

And the fatherly eyes turned fondly to that pretty winking light ; the fatherly heart began to hover over the dear little nest of home.

“Surely, there’s some one at the white gate. Ursula !”

“John ! Ah—it is you.”

The mother did not express her feelings after the fashion of most women ; but I knew by her waiting there, and by the nervous tremble of her hand, how great her anxiety had been.

“Is all safe, husband ?”

“I think so. Mr. Oldtower is elected—he must fly the country.”

“Then she is saved.”

“Let us hope she is. Come, my darling !” and he wrapped his warm arm round her, for she was shivering. “We have done all we could, and must wait the rest. Come home, Oh !” with a lifted look and a closer strain, “thank God for home !”

CHAPTER X.

WE always rose early at Longfield. It was lovely to see the morning sun climbing over One-tree hill, catching the larch-wood, and creeping down the broad slope of our field ; thence up towards Redwood and Leckington—until, while the dews yet lay thick on our shadowed valley, Leckington Hill was all in a glow of light. Delicious, too, to hear the little ones running in and out, bright and merry as children ought to be in the first wholesome hours of the day—to see them feeding their chickens and petting their doves—calling every minute on father or mother to investigate and enjoy some wonder in farm-yard or garden. And either was ever ready to listen to the smallest of these little mysteries, knowing that nothing in childhood is too trivial for the notice, too foolish for the sympathy, of those on whom

the Father of all men has bestowed the holy dignity of parenthood.

I could see them now, standing among the flower-beds, out in the sunny morning, the father's tall head in the centre of the group—for he was always the important person during the brief hour or two that he was able to be at home. The mother close beside him, and both knotted round with an interlaced mass of little arms and little eager faces, each wanting to hear everything and to look at everything—everybody to be first and nobody last. None rested quiet or mute for a second, except the one who kept close as his shadow to her father's side, and unwittingly was treated by him less like the other children, than like some stray spirit of another world, caught and held jealously, but without much outward notice, lest haply it might take alarm, and vanish back again unawares. Whenever he came home and did not see her waiting at the door, his first question was always,—“Where's Muriel?”

Muriel's still face looked very bright this morning—the Monday morning after the election—because her father was going to be at home the whole day. It was the annual holiday he had planned for his work-people. This

only "dinner-party" we had ever given—was in its character not unlike that memorable Feast, to which were gathered the poor, the lame, the halt, and the blind—all who needed, and all who could not return, the kindness. There were great cooking preparations—everything that could make merry the heart of man—tea, to comfort the heart of woman, hard-working woman—and lots of bright pennies and silver groats to rejoice the very soul of youth.

Mrs. Halifax, Jem Watkins and his Jenny, were as busy as bees all morning. John did his best to help, but finally the mother pleaded how hard it was that the children should miss their holiday walk with him, so we were all dismissed from the scene of action, to spend a long quiet two-hours, lying under the great oak on One-tree Hill. The little ones played about till they were tired; then John took out the newspaper, and read about Ciudad Rodrigo and Lord Wellington's entry into Madrid—the battered eagles and the torn and bloody flags of Badajos, which were on their way home to the Prince Regent.

"I wish the fighting were over, and peace were come," said Muriel.

But the boys wished quite otherwise; they

already gloried in the accounts of battles, played domestic games of French and English, acted garden sieges and blockades.

“How strange and awful it seems, to sit on this green grass, looking down our quiet valley, and then think of the fighting far away in Spain—perhaps this very minute, under this very sky. Boys, I’ll never let either of you be a soldier.

“Poor little fellows!” said I, “they can remember nothing but war time.”

“What would peace be like?” asked Muriel.

“A glorious time, my child—rejoicings everywhere, fathers and brothers coming home, work thriving, poor men’s food made cheap, and all things prospering.”

“I should like to live to see it. Shall I be a woman then, father?”

He started. Somehow, she seemed so unlike an ordinary child, that while all the boys’ future was merrily planned out—the mother often said, laughing, she knew exactly what sort of a young man Guy would be—none of us ever seemed to think of Muriel as a woman.

“Is Muriel anxious to be grown up? Is she not satisfied with being my little daughter always?”

“ Always.”

Her father drew her to him, and kissed her soft, shut, blind eyes. Then, sighing, he rose, and proposed that we should all go home.

This first feast at Longfield was a most merry day. The men and their families came about noon. Soon after, they all sat down to dinner; Jem Watkins’s plan of the barn being universally scouted in favour of an open-air feast, in the shelter of a hay-rick, under the mild blue September sky. Jem presided with a ponderous dignity which throughout the day furnished great private amusement to Ursula, John, and me.

In the afternoon, all rambled about as they liked—many under the ciceroni-ship of Master Edwin and Master Guy, who were very popular and grand indeed. Then the mother, with little Walter clinging shy-eyed to her gown, went among the other poorer mothers there; talked to one, comforted another, counselled a third, and invariably listened to all. There was little of patronizing benevolence about her; she spoke freely, sometimes even with some sharpness, when reproving comment was needed; but her earnest kindliness, her active goodness, darting at once to the truth and right of things, touched the women’s hearts. While a few were

a little wholesomely afraid of her—all recognized the influence of “the mistress,” penetrating deep and sure, extending far and wide.

She laughed at me when I told her so—said it was all nonsense — that she only followed John’s simple recipe, for making his workpeople feel that he was a friend as well as a master.

“What is that?”

“To pay attention and consideration to all they say ; and always to take care and remember to call them by their right Christian names.”

I could not help smiling—it was an answer so like Mrs. Halifax, who never indulged in any verbal sentimentalisms. Her part in the world was deeds.

It was already evening, when having each contributed our quota, great or small, to the entertainment, we all came and sat on the long bench under the walnut-tree. The sun went down red behind us, throwing a last glint on the upland field, where, from top to bottom, the young men and women were running in a long “Thread-the-needle.” Their voices and laughter came faintly down to us.

“I think they have had a happy day, John. They will work all the better to-morrow.”

“I am quite sure of it.”

“So am I,” said Guy, who had been acting the young master all day, condescendingly stating his will and giving his opinion on every subject, greatly petted and looked up to by all, to the no small amusement of us elders.

“Why, my son?” asked the father, smiling.

But here Master Guy was posed, and everybody laughed at him. He coloured up with childish anger, and crept nearer his mother. She made a place for him at her side, looking appealingly at John.

“Guy has got out of his depth—we must help him into safe waters again,” said the father. “Look here, my son, this is the reason—and it is well not to be ‘quite sure’ of a thing unless one knows the reason. Our people will work the better, because they will work from love. Not merely doing their duty, and obeying their master in a blind way, but feeling an interest in him and all that belong to him; knowing that he feels the same in them. Knowing, too, that although, being their superior in many things, he is their master and they his servants, he never forgets that saying, which I read out of the Bible, children, this morning: ‘*One is your master—even Christ, and all ye are brethren.*’ Do you understand?”

I think they did, for he was accustomed to talk with them thus—even beyond their years. Not in the way of preachifying—for these little ones had in their childish days scarcely any so-called “religious instruction,” save the daily chapter out of the New Testament, and the father and mother’s daily life, which was a simple and literal carrying out of the same. To that one test was brought, all that was thought, or said, or done, in our household, where it often seemed as if the Master were as visibly obeyed and followed as in the household which He loved at Bethany.

As to what doctrinal creed we held, or what sect we belonged to, I can give but the plain answer which John gave to all such enquiries—that we were *Christians*.

After these words from the Holy Book (which the children always listened to with great reverence, as to the Book which their parents most loved and honoured, the reading and learning of which was granted as a high reward and favour, and never carelessly allowed, or—horrible to think!—inflicted as a punishment), we ceased smiling at Guy, who in his turn ceased to frown. The little storm blew over, as our domestic storms usually did, leaving a clear, free heaven.

Loving one another, of course we quarrelled sometimes; but we always made it up again, because—we loved one another.

“Father, I hear the click of the gate. There’s somebody coming,” said Muriel.

The father paused in a great romp with his sons—paused, as he ever did when his little daughter’s soft voice was heard. “’Tis only a poor boy—who can he be?”

“One of the folk that come for milk most likely—but we have none to give away to-day. What do you want, my lad?”

The lad, who looked miserable and scared, opened his mouth with a stupid “Eh?”

Ursula repeated the question.

“I wants Jacob Baines.”

“You’ll find him with the rest, in front of that hay-rick, over his pipe and ale.”

The lad was off like a shot.

“He is from Kingswell, I think. Can anything be the matter, John?”

“I will go and see. No, boys, no more games—I will be back presently.”

He went, apparently rather anxious—as was easy to find out by only a glance at the face of Ursula. Soon she rose and went after him. I followed her.

We saw, close by the hay-rick, a group of men, angrily talking. The gossiping mothers were just joining them. Far off, in the field, the younger folk were still dancing merrily down their long line of "Thread-the-needle."

As we approached, we heard sobbing from one or two women, and loud curses from the men.

"What's amiss?" said Mr. Halifax, as he came in the midst—and both curses and sobbings were silenced. All began a confused tale of wrongs. "Stop, Jacob—I can't make it out."

"This lad ha' seen it all. And he bean't a liar in big things—speak up, Billy."

Somehow or other, we extracted the news brought by ragged Billy, who on this day had been left in charge of the five dwellings rented of Lord Luxmore. During the owners' absence there had been a distraint for rent; every bit of the furniture was carried off; two or three aged and sick folk were left lying on the bare floor—and the poor families here would have to go home to nothing but their four walls.

Again, at repetition of the story, the women wept and the men swore.

"Be quiet," said Mr. Halifax again. But I

saw that his honest English blood was boiling within him. "Jem"—and Jem Watkins started, so unusually sharp and commanding was his master's tone—"Saddle the mare—quick. I shall ride to Kingswell, and thence to the sheriff's."

"God bless 'ee, sir!" sobbed Jacob Baines' widowed daughter-in-law, who had left, as I overheard her telling Mrs. Halifax, a sick child to-day at home.

Jacob Baines took up a heavy knobbed stick which happened to be leaning against the hay-rick, and eyed it with savage meaning.

"Who be they as has done this, master?"

"Put that bludgeon down, Jacob."

The man hesitated—met his master's determined eye—and obeyed him, meek as a lamb.

"But what is us to do, sir?"

"Nothing. Stay here till I return—you shall come to no harm. You will trust me, my men?"

They gathered round him—those big, fierce-looking fellows, in whom was brute force enough to attack or resist anything—yet he made them listen to reason. He explained as much as he could of the injustice which had apparently been done them—injustice which had overstepped the

law, and could only be met by keeping absolutely within the law.

“It is partly my fault, that I did not pay the rent to-day—I will do so at once. I will get your goods back to-night, if I can. If not, you hale fellows can rough it, and we’ll take the women and children in till morning—can we not, love?”

“Ay, readily!” said the mother. “Don’t cry, my good women. Mary Baines, give me your baby. Cheer up—the master will set all right!”

John smiled at her in fond thanks—the wife who hindered him by no selfishness or weakness, but was his right hand and support in every thing. As he mounted, she gave him his whip, whispering,

“Take care of yourself, mind. Come back, as soon as you can.”

And lingeringly she watched him gallop down the field.

It was a strange three hours we passed in his absence. The misty night came down, and round about the house crept wailing the loud September wind. We brought the women into the kitchen—the men lit a fire in the farm-yard,

and sat sullenly round it. It was as much as I could do to persuade Guy and Edwin to go to bed, instead of watching that "beautiful blaze." There, more than once, I saw the mother standing, with a shawl over her head and her white gown blowing, trying to reason into patience those poor fellows, savage with their wrongs.

"How far have they been wronged, Phineas? What is the strict law of the case? Will any harm come to John for interfering?"

I told her, no, so far as I knew. That the cruelty and illegality lay in the haste of the distraint, and in the goods having been carried off at once, giving no opportunity of redeeming them. It was easy to grind the faces of the poor, who had no helper.

"Never mind; my husband will see them righted—at all risks."

"But Lord Luxmore is his landlord."

She looked troubled. "I see what you mean. It is easy to make an enemy. No matter—I fear not. I fear nothing while John does what he feels to be right—as I know he will; the issue is in Higher Hands than ours or Lord Luxmore's. —But where's Muriel?"

For as we sat talking, the little girl—whom nothing could persuade to go to bed till her

father came home—had slipped from my hand, and gone out into the blustering night. We found her standing all by herself under the walnut-tree.

“I wanted to listen for father. When will he come?”

“Soon, I hope,” answered the mother with a sigh. “You must not stay out in the cold and the dark, my child.”

“I am not cold, and I know no dark,” said softly Muriel.

And thus so it was with her always. In her spirit, as in her outward life, so innocent and harmless, she knew no dark. No cold looks—no sorrowful sights—no winter—no age. The hand laid upon her dear eyes, pressed eternal peace down on her soul. I believe she was, if ever human being was, purely and entirely happy. It was always sweet for us to know this—it is very sweet still, Muriel, our beloved!

We brought her within the house, but she persisted in sitting in her usual place, on the door-sill, “waiting” for her father. It was she who first heard the white gate swing, and told us he was coming.

Ursula ran down to the stream to meet him.

When they came up the path, it was not alone—John was helping a lame old woman, and his wife carried in her arms a sick child, on whom, when they entered the kitchen, Mary Baines threw herself in a passion of crying.

“What have they been doing to ’ee, Tommy? ’ee warn’t like this when I left ’ee. O they’ve been killing my lad, they have!”

“Hush!” said Mrs. Halifax; “we’ll get him well again, please God. Listen to what the master’s saying.”

He was telling to the men who gathered round the kitchen-door, the results of his journey.

It was, as I had expected from his countenance the first minute he appeared—fruitless. He had found all things at Kingswell as stated. Then he rode to the sheriff’s; but Sir Ralph was absent, sent for to Luxmore Hall on very painful business.

“My friends,” said the master, stopping abruptly in his narrative—“for a few hours you must make up your minds to sit still and bear it. Every man has to learn that lesson at times. Your landlord has—I would rather be the poorest among you, than Lord Luxmore this night. Be patient; we’ll lodge you all somehow. Tomorrow I will pay your rent—get your goods

back—and you shall begin the world again, as my tenants, not Lord Luxmore's."

"Hurrah!" shouted the men, easily satisfied; as working people are, who have been used all their days to live from hand to mouth, and to whom the present is all in all. They followed the master, who settled them in the barn; and then came back to consult with his wife as to where the women could be stowed away. So, in a short time, the five homeless families were cheerily disposed of—all but Mary Baines and her sick boy.

"What can we do with them?" said John, questioning to Ursula.

"I see but one course. We must take him in; his mother says hunger is the chief thing that ails the lad. She fancies he has had measles; but our children have had it too, so there's no fear. Come up stairs, Mary Baines."

Passing, with a thankful look, the room where her own boys slept, the good mother established this forlorn young mother and her two children in a little closet outside the nursery-door; cheered her with comfortable words; helped her ignorance with wise counsels—for Ursula was the general doctress of all the poor

folk round. It was almost midnight before she came down to the parlour where John and I sat, he with little Muriel asleep in his arms. The child would gladly have slumbered away all night there, with the delicate, pale profile pressed close into his breast.

"Is all right, love? How tired you must be!" John put his left arm round his wife as she came and knelt by him, in front of the warm, cheerful fire.

"Tired? Oh, of course; but you can't think how comfortable they are up-stairs. Only poor Mary Baines does nothing but cry, and keep telling me that nothing ails her lad but hunger. Are they so very poor?"

John did not immediately answer; I fancied he looked suddenly uneasy, and imperceptibly pressed his little girl closer to him.

"The lad seems very ill. Much worse than our children were."

"Yet how they suffered, poor pets! especially Walter. It was the thought of them made me pity her so. Surely I have not done wrong?"

"No—love; quite right and kind. Acting so, I think one need not fear. See, mother, how soundly Muriel sleeps. It's almost

a pity to waken her—but we must go to bed now.”

“Stay one minute,” I said. “Tell us, John—I quite forgot to ask till now—what is that ‘painful business’ you mentioned, which called the sheriff to Lord Luxmore’s?”

John glanced at his wife, leaning fondly against him, her face full of sweet peace, then at his little daughter asleep, then round the cheerful fire-lit room, outside which the autumn night-wind went howling furiously.

“Love, we that are so happy, we must not, dare not, condemn.”

She looked at him with a shocked inquiry. “You don’t mean—No; it is impossible!”

“It is true. She has gone away.”

Ursula sank down, hiding her face. “Horrible! And only two days since she was here, kissing our children.”

We all three kept a long silence; then I ventured to ask when she went away?

“This morning, early. They took—at least Mr. Vermilye did—all the property of Lord Luxmore’s that he could lay his hands upon—family jewels and money to a considerable amount. The earl is pursuing him now, not only as his

daughter's seducer, but as a swindler and a thief."

"And Richard Brithwood?"

"Drinks—and drinks—and drinks. That is the beginning and the end of all."

There was no more to be said. She had dropped for ever out of her old life, as completely as a star out of the sky. Henceforth, for years and years, neither in our home nor I believe in any other, was there the slightest mention made of Lady Caroline Brithwood.

* * * *

All the next day John was from home, settling the Kingswell affair. The ejected tenants—our tenants now—left us at last, giving a parting cheer for Mr. Halifax, the best master in all England.

Sitting down to tea, with no small relief that all was over, John asked his wife after the sick lad.

"He is very ill still, I think."

"Are you sure it is measles?"

"I imagine so; and I have seen nearly all childish diseases, except—No, *that* is quite impossible!" added the mother, hastily. She cast an anxious glance on her little ones; her hand

slightly shook as she poured out their cups of milk. "Do you think, John—it was hard to do it when the child is so ill—I ought to have sent them away with the others?"

"Certainly not. If it were anything dangerous, of course Mary Baines would have told us. What are the lad's symptoms?"

As Ursula informed him, I thought he looked more and more serious; but he did not let her see.

"Make your mind easy, love; a word from Dr. Jessop will decide all. I will fetch him after tea. Cheer up! Please God, no harm will come to our little ones!"

The mother brightened again; with her all the rest; and the tea-table clatter went on, merry as ever. Then, it being a wet night, Mrs. Halifax gathered her boys round her knee for an evening chat over the kitchen-fire; while through the open door, out of the dim parlour came "Muriel's voice," as we called the harpsichord. It seemed sweeter than ever this night, like—as her father once said, but checked himself, and never said it afterwards—like Muriel talking with angels.

He sat listening awhile, then, without any

remark, put on his coat and went out to fetch the good doctor. I followed him down to the stream.

“Phineas,” he said, “will you mind—don’t notice it to the mother—but mind and keep her and the children down stairs till I come back?”

I promised. “Are you uneasy about Mary Baines’s lad?”

“No; I have full trust both in human means, and above all, in—what I need not speak of. Still, precautions are wise. Do you remember that day when, rather against Ursula’s wish, I vaccinated the children?”

I remembered. Also that the virus had taken effect with all but Muriel; and we had lately talked of repeating the much-blamed and miraculous experiment upon her. I hinted this.

“Phineas, you mistake,” he answered, rather sharply. “She is quite safe—as safe as the others. I wrote to Dr. Jenner himself. But don’t mention that I spoke about this.”

“Why not?”

“Because to-day I heard that they have had the small-pox at Kingswell.”

I felt a cold shudder. Though inoculation and vaccination had made it less fatal

among the upper classes, this frightful scourge still decimated the poor, especially children. Great was the obstinacy in refusing relief; and loud the outcry in Norton Bury, when Mr. Halifax, who had met and known Dr. Jenner in London—finding no practitioner who would do it—persisted in administering the vaccine virus himself to his own children. But still, with a natural fear, he had kept them out of all risk of taking the small-pox until now.

“John, do you think—”

“No; I will not allow myself to think. Not a word of this at home, mind. Good-bye!”

He walked away, and I returned up the path heavily, as if a cloud of terror and dole were visibly hanging over our happy Longfield.

The doctor appeared; he went up to the sick lad; then he and Mr. Halifax were closeted together for a long time. After he was gone, John came into the kitchen, where Ursula sat with Walter on her knee. The child was in his little white night-gown, playing with his elder brothers, and warming his rosy toes.

The mother had recovered herself entirely: was content and gay. I saw John's glance at her, and then—then I feared.

“What does the doctor say? The child will soon be well?”

“We must hope so.”

“John, what do you mean? I thought the little fellow looked better when I went up to see him last. And there—I hear the poor mother up stairs crying.”

“She may cry; she has need,” said John, bitterly. “She knew it all the while. She never thought of *our* children; but they are safe. Be content, love—please God, they are quite safe. Very few take it after vaccination.”

“It—do you mean the small-pox? Has the lad got small-pox? Oh, God help us! My children—my children!”

She grew white as death; long shivers came over her from head to foot. The little boys, frightened, crept up to her; she clasped them all together in her arms, turning her head with a wild, savage look, as if some one were stealing behind to take them from her.

Muriel, perceiving the silence, felt her way across the room, and, touching her mother’s face, said, anxiously, “Has anybody been naughty?”

“No, my darling; no!”

“Then never mind. Father says, nothing

will harm us, except being naughty. Did you not, father?"

John snatched his little daughter up to his bosom, and called her for the hundredth time the name my poor old father had named her—the "blessed" child.

We all grew calmer; the mother wept a little, and it did her good; we comforted the boys and Muriel, telling them that in truth nothing was the matter, only we were afraid of their catching the little lad's sickness, and they must not go near him.

"Yes; she shall quit the house this minute—this very minute," said the mother, sternly, but with a sort of wildness too.

Her husband made no immediate answer; but as she rose to leave the room, he detained her. "Ursula, do you know the child is all but dying?"

"Let him die! The wicked woman! She knew it, and she let me bring him among my children—my own poor children!"

"I would she had never come. But what is done, is done. Love, think—if *you* were turned out of doors this bleak, rainy night—with a dying child."

“Hush ! hush !”—She sank down with a sob.

“My darling !” whispered John, as he made her lean against him—her support and comfort in all things ; “do you think my heart is not ready to break, like yours ? But I trust in God. This trouble came upon us while we were doing right ; let us do right still, and we need not fear. Humanly speaking, our children are safe ; it is only our own terror which exaggerates the danger. They may not take the disease at all. Then, how could we answer it to our conscience if we turned out this poor soul, and *her* child died ?”

“No ! no !”

“We will use all precautions. The boys shall be moved to the other end of the house.”

I proposed that they should occupy my room, as I had had small-pox, and was safe.

“Thank you, Phineas ; and even should they take it, Dr. Jenner has assured me that in every case after vaccination it has been the very slightest form of the complaint. Be patient, love ; trust in God, and have no fear.”

Her husband’s voice gradually calmed her. At last, she turned and clung round his neck, silently and long. Then she rose up and went

about her usual duties, just as if this horrible dread were not upon us.

Mary Baines and her children stayed in the house. Next day, about noon, the little lad died.

It was the first death that had ever happened under our roof. It shocked us all very much, especially the children. We kept them far away on the other side of the house—out of the house, when possible—but still they would be coming back and looking up at that window, at which, as Muriel declared, the little sick boy “had turned into an angel and flown away.” The mother allowed the fancy to remain; she thought it wrong and horrible that a child’s first idea of death should be “putting into the pit-hole.” Truer and more beautiful was Muriel’s instinctive notion of “turning into an angel and flying away.” So we arranged that the poor little body should be confined and removed before the children rose next morning.

It was a very quiet tea-time. A sense of awe was upon the little ones, they knew not why. Many questions they asked about poor Tommy Baines, and where he had gone to, which the mother only answered after the simple manner of scripture—he “was not, for God took

him." But when they saw Mary Baines go crying down the field-path, Muriel asked "why she cried? how could she cry, when it was God who had taken little Tommy?"

Afterwards, she tried to learn of me privately, what sort of place it was he had gone to, and how he went; whether he had carried with him all his clothes, and especially the great bunch of woodbine she sent to him yesterday; above all, whether he had gone by himself, or if some of the "angels," which held so large a place in Muriel's thoughts and of which she was ever talking, had come to fetch him and take care of him. She hoped—indeed, she felt sure—they had. She wished she had met them, or heard them about in the house.

And seeing how the child's mind was running on the subject, I thought it best to explain to her as simply as I could, the solemn putting off of life and putting on of immortality. I wished that my darling, who could never visibly behold death, should understand it as no image of terror but only as a calm sleep and a joyful waking, in another country, the glories of which eye had not seen nor ear heard.

"Eye has not seen!" repeated Muriel, thoughtfully; "can people *see* there, Uncle Phineas?"

“Yes, my child. There is no darkness at all.”

She paused a minute, and said earnestly, “I want to go—I very much want to go. How long do you think it will be before the angels come for me?”

“Many, many years, my precious one,” said I, shuddering; for truly she looked so like them, that I began to fear they were close at hand.

But a few minutes afterwards she was playing with her brothers and talking to her pet doves, so sweet and humanlike, that the fear passed away.

We sent the children early to bed that night, and sat long by the fire, consulting how best to remove infection, and almost satisfied that in these two days it could not have taken any great hold on the house. John was firm in his belief in Dr. Jenner and vaccination. We went to bed greatly comforted, and the household sank into quiet slumbers, even though under its roof slept, in deeper sleep, the little dead child.

That small closet, which was next to the nursery I occupied, safely shut out by it from the rest of the house, seemed very still now. I went to

sleep thinking of it, and dreamed of it afterwards.

In the middle of the night a slight noise woke me, and I almost fancied I was dreaming still; for there I saw a little white figure gliding past my bed's foot; so softly and soundlessly,—it might have been the ghost of a child—and it went into the dead child's room.

For a moment, that superstitious intuition which I believe we all have, paralyzed me. Then I tried to listen. There was most certainly a sound in the next room — a faint cry, quickly smothered—a very human cry. All the stories I had ever heard of supposed death and premature burial rushed horribly into my mind. Conquering alike my superstitious dread or fear of entering the infected room, I leaped out of bed, threw on some clothes, got a light, and went in.

There lay the little corpse, all safe and still—for ever. And like its own spirit watching in the night at the head of the forsaken clay, sat Muriel.

I snatched her up and ran with her out of the room, in an agony of fear.

She hid her face on my shoulder, trembling. "I have not done wrong, have I? I wanted

to know what it was like—that which you said was left of little Tommy. I touched it—it was so cold. Oh! Uncle Phineas! *that* isn't poor little Tommy?"

"No, my blessed one—no, my dearest child! Don't think of it any more."

And, hardly knowing what was best to be done, I called John, and told him where I had found his little daughter. He never spoke, but snatched her out of my arms into his own, took her in his room, and shut the door.

From that time our fears never slumbered. For one whole week we waited, watching the children hour by hour, noting each change in each little face; then Muriel sickened.

It was I who had to tell her father, when as he came home in the evening I met him by the stream. It seemed to him almost like the stroke of death.

"Oh, my God! not her! Any but her!" And by that I knew, what I had long guessed, that she was the dearest of all his children.

Edwin and Walter took the disease likewise, though lightly. No one was in absolute danger except Muriel. But for weeks we had what people call "sickness in the house;" that terrible

overhanging shadow which mothers and fathers well know ; under which one must live and move, never resting night nor day. This mother and father bore their portion, and bore it well. When she broke down, which was not often, he sustained her. If I were to tell of all he did—how, after being out all day, night after night he would sit up watching by and nursing each little fretful sufferer, patient as a woman, and pleasant as a child-playmate—perhaps those who talk loftily of “ the dignity of man,” would smile. I pardon them.

The hardest minute of the twenty-four hours was, I think, that when, coming home, he caught sight of me afar off, waiting for him, as I always did, at the white gate ; and many a time, as we walked down to the stream, I saw—what no one else saw but God. After such times I used often to ponder over what great love His must be, who, as the clearest revelation of it and of its nature, calls Himself “ the Father.”

And He brought us safe through our time of anguish : He left us every one of our little ones.

One November Sunday, when all the fields were in a mist, and the rain came pouring softly and incessantly upon the patient earth, which

had been so torn and dried up by east winds, that she seemed glad enough to put aside the mockery of sunshine and melt in quiet tears, we once more gathered our flock together in thankfulness and joy.

Muriel came down stairs triumphantly in her father's arms, and lay on the sofa smiling; the firelight dancing on her small white face—white and unscarred. The disease had been kind to the blind child; she was, I think, more sweet-looking than ever. Older, perhaps; the round prettiness of childhood gone—but her whole appearance wore that inexpressible expression, in which, for want of a suitable word, we all embody our vague notions of the unknown world, and call “angelic.”

“Does Muriel feel quite well—quite strong and well?” the father and mother both kept saying every now and then, as they looked at her. She always answered, “Quite well.”

In the afternoon, when the boys were playing in the kitchen, and John and I were standing at the open door listening to the dropping of the rain in the garden, we heard, after its long silence, Muriel's “voice.”

“Father, listen!” whispered the mother, linking her arm through his as he stood at the door.

Soft and slow came the notes of the old harpsichord — she was playing one of the abbey anthems. Then it melted away into melodies we knew not—sweet and strange. Her parents looked at one another—their hearts were full of thankfulness and joy.

“And Mary Baines’ little lad is in the church-yard.”

CHAPTER XI.

“WHAT a comfort ! the daylight is lengthening. I think this has been the very dreariest winter I ever knew. Has it not, my little daughter ? Who brought her these violets ?”

And John placed himself on a corner of my own particular arm-chair, where, somehow or other, Muriel always lay curled up at tea-time now—(ay, and many hours in the day-time, though we hardly noticed it at first). Taking between his hands the little face, which broke into smiles at the merest touch of the father’s fingers, he asked her, “when she intended to go a walk with him ?”

“To-morrow.”

“So we have said for a great many to-morrows, but it is always put off. What do you think, mother—is the little maid strong enough ?”

Mrs. Halifax hesitated ; said something about “east winds.”

"Yet, I think it would do her good if she braved east winds, and played out of doors as the boys do. Would you not like it, Muriel?"

The child shrank back with an involuntary "Oh, no."

"That is because she is a little girl, necessarily less strong than the lads are. Is it not so, Uncle Phineas?" continued her father, hastily, for I was watching them.

"Muriel will be quite strong when the warm weather comes. We have had such a severe winter. Every one of the children has suffered," said the mother in a cheerful tone, as she poured out a cup of cream for her daughter, to whom was now given, by common consent, all the richest and rarest of the house.

"I think every one has," said John, looking round on his apple-cheeked boys; it must have been a sharp eye that detected any decrease of health or increase of suffering, there. "But my plan will set all to rights. I spoke to Mrs. Tod yesterday. She will be ready to take us all in. Boys, shall you like going to Enderley? You shall go as soon as ever the larch-wood is green."

For, at Longfield, already we began to make

a natural almanac and chronological table. "When the may was out,"—"When Guy found the first robin's nest,"—"When the field was all cowslips,"—and so on.

"Is it absolutely necessary we should go?" said the mother, who had a strong home-clinging, and already began to hold tiny Longfield as the apple of her eye.

"I think so, unless you will consent to let me go alone to Enderley."

She shook her head.

"What, with those troubles at the mills? How can you speak so lightly?"

"Not lightly, love—only cheerfully. The troubles must be borne; why not bear them with as good heart as possible? They cannot last—let Lord Luxmore do what he will. If, as I told you, we re-let Longfield for this one summer to Sir Ralph, we shall save enough to put the mill in thorough repair. If my landlord will not do it, I will; and add a steam-engine, too."

Now the last was a daring scheme, discussed many a winter night by us three in Longfield parlour. At first, Mrs. Halifax had looked grave—most women would, especially wives and mothers, in those days when every innovation was

regarded with horror, and improvement and ruin were held synonymous. She might have thought so too, had she not believed in her husband. But now, at mention of the steam-engine, she looked up and smiled.

“Lady Oldtower asked me about it to-day. She said, ‘she hoped you would not ruin yourself, like Mr. Miller of Glasgow?’ I said I was not afraid.”

Her husband returned a bright look. “It is easier to make the world trust one, when one is trusted by one’s own household.”

“Ah! never fear; you will make your fortune yet, in spite of Lord Luxmore.”

For, all winter, John had found out how many cares come with an attained wish. Chiefly, because, as the earl had said, his lordship possessed an “excellent memory.” The Kingswell election had worked its results in a hundred small ways, wherein the heavy hand of the landlord could be laid upon the tenant. He bore up bravely against it; but hard was the struggle between might and right, oppression and staunch resistance. It would have gone harder, but for one whom John now began to call his “friend;” at least, one who invariably called Mr. Halifax so—our neighbour, Sir Ralph Oldtower.

“How often has Lady Oldtower been here, Ursula?”

“She called first, you remember, after our trouble with the children; she has been twice since, I think. To-day she wanted me to bring Muriel and take luncheon at the Manor House. I shall not go—I told her so.”

“But gently, I hope?—you are so very outspoken, love. You made her clearly understand that it is not from incivility we decline her invitations?—Well—never mind! Some day we will take our place, and so shall our children, with any gentry in the land.”

I think—though John rarely betrayed it—he had strongly this presentiment of future power, which may often be noticed in men who have carved out their own fortunes. They have in them the instinct to rise; and as surely as water regains its own level, so do they, from however low a source, ascend to theirs.

Not many weeks after, we removed in a body to Enderley. Though the chief reason was, that John might be constantly on the spot, superintending his mills, yet I fancied I could detect a secondary reason, which he would not own even to himself; but which peered out un-

consciously in his anxious looks. I saw it when he tried to rouse Muriel into energy, by telling her how much she would enjoy Enderley Hill ; how sweet the primroses grew in the beech-wood, and how wild and fresh the wind swept over the common, morning and night. His daily longing seemed to be to make her love the world, and the things therein. He used to turn away, almost in pain, from her smile, as she would listen to all he said, then steal off to the harpsichord, and begin that soft, dreamy music, which the children called " talking to angels."

We came to Enderley through the valley, where was John's cloth-mill. Many a time in our walks he and I had passed it, and stopped to listen to the drowsy fall of the miniature Niagara, or watch the incessant turning—turning, of the great water-wheel. Little we thought he should ever own it, or that John would be pointing it out to his own boys, lecturing them on " under-shot," and " over-shot," as he used to lecture me.

It was sweet, though half-melancholy, to see Enderley again ; to climb the steep meadows, and narrow mule-paths, up which he used to help me so kindly. He could not now ; he had

his little daughter in his arms. It had come, alas ! to be a regular thing that Muriel should be carried up every slight ascent, and along every hard road. We paused half-way up on a low wall, where I had many a time rested, watching the sun-set over Nunnely hill—watching for John to come home. Every night—at least after Miss March went away—he usually found me sitting there.

He turned to me and smiled. “Dost remember, lad?” at which appellation Guy widely stared. But for a minute how strangely it brought back old times, when there were neither wife nor children—only he and I. This seat on the wall, with its small twilight picture of the valley below the mill, and Nunnely heights with that sentinel row of sun-set trees—was all mine—mine solely—for evermore.

“Enderley is just the same, Phineas. Twelve years have made no change—except in us.” And he looked fondly at his wife, who stood a little way off, holding firmly on the wall, in a hazardous group, her three boys. “I think the chorus and comment on all life might be included in two brief phrases given by our friend Shakspeare, one to Hamlet—the other to Othello; ‘*Tis very strange,*’ and ‘*Tis better as it is.*’”

“Ay—ay,” said I, thoughtfully. Better as it was ; better, a thousand times !

I went to Mrs. Halifax, and helped her to describe the prospect to the inquisitive boys ; finally coaxing the refractory Guy up the winding-road, where, just as if it had been yesterday, stood my old friends, my four Lombardy poplars, three together and one apart.

Mrs. Tod descried us afar off, and was waiting at the gate ; a little stouter, a little rosier—that was all. In her delight, she absolutely forgot herself so far as to address the mother as Miss March ; at which long-unspoken name Ursula started, her colour went and came, and her eyes turned restlessly towards the church hard by.

“It is all right—Miss—Ma’am, I mean. Tod bears in mind Mr. Halifax’s orders, and has planted lots o’ flower-roots and evergreens.”

“Yes, I know.”

And when she had put all her little ones to bed—we, wondering where the mother was, went out towards the little churchyard, and found her quietly sitting there.

We were very happy at Enderley. Muriel brightened up before she had been there many days. She began to throw off her listlessness, and go about with me everywhere. It was the

season she enjoyed most—the time of the singing of birds, and the springing of delicate-scented flowers. I myself never loved the beechwood better than did our Muriel. She used continually to tell us, this was 'the happiest spring she had ever had in her life.

John was much occupied now. He left his Norton Bury business under efficient care, and devoted himself almost wholly to the cloth mill. Early and late he was there. Very often Muriel and I followed him, and spent whole mornings in the mill meadows. Through them the stream on which the machinery depended was led by various contrivances, checked or increased in its flow, making small ponds, or locks, or waterfalls. We used to stay for hours listening to its murmur, to the sharp, strange cry of the swans that were kept there, and the twitter of the water-hen to her young among the reeds. Then the father would come to us and remain a few minutes—fondling Muriel, and telling me how things went on at the mill.

One morning, as we three sat there, on the brick-work of a little bridge, underneath an elm tree, round the roots of which the water made a pool so clear that we could see a large pike lying

like a black shadow, half-way down ;—John suddenly said—

“What is the matter with the stream ? Do you notice, Phineas ?”

“I have seen it gradually lowering—these two hours. I thought you were drawing off the water.”

“Nothing of the kind—I must look after it. Good bye, my little daughter. Don’t cling so fast ; father will be back soon—and isn’t this a sweet sunny place for a little maid to be lazy in ?”

His tone was gay, but he had an anxious look. He walked rapidly down the meadows, and went into his mill. Then I saw him retracing his steps, examining where the stream entered the bounds of his property. Finally, he walked off towards the little town at the head of the valley—beyond which, buried in woods, lay Luxmore Hall. It was two hours more before we saw him again.

Then he came towards us, narrowly watching the stream. It had sunk more and more—the muddy bottom was showing plainly.

“Yes—that’s it—it can be nothing else ! I did not think he would have dared to do it.”

“Do what, John ? Who ?”

“Lord Luxmore.” He spoke in the smothered tones of violent passion. “Lord Luxmore has turned out of its course the stream that works my mill.”

I tried to urge that such an act was improbable ; in fact against the law.

“Not against the law of the great against the little ! Besides, he gives a decent colouring—says he only wants the use of the stream three days a week, to make fountains at Luxmore Hall. But I see what it is—I have seen it coming a whole year. He is determined to ruin me !”

John said this in much excitement. He hardly felt Muriel’s tiny creeping hands.

“What does ‘ruin’ mean ? Is anybody making father angry ?”

“No, my sweet—not angry—only very, very miserable !”

He snatched her up, and buried his head in her soft childish bosom. She kissed him and patted his hair.

“Never mind, dear father. You say nothing signifies, if we are only good. And father is always good.”

“I wish I were.”

He sat down with her on his knee ; the murmur of the elm-leaves and the slow dropping of the stream soothed him. By and by, his spirit rose, as it always did, the heavier it was pressed down.

“ No, Lord Luxmore shall not ruin me ! I have thought of a scheme. But first, I must speak to my people—I shall have to shorten wages for a time.”

“ How soon ? ”

“ To-night. If it must be done—better done at once, before winter sets in. Poor fellows ! it will go hard with them—they’ll be hard upon me. But it is only temporary ; I must reason them into patience, if I can ;—God knows, it is not they alone who want it.”

He almost ground his teeth as he saw the sun shining on the far white wing of Luxmore Hall.

“ Have you no way of righting yourself ? If it is an unlawful act, why not go to law ? ”

“ Phineas, you forget my principle—only mine, however ; I do not force it upon any one else—my firm principle, that I will never go to law. Never ! I would not like to have it said, in contradistinction to the old saying, ‘ See how these Christians *fight* ! ’ ”

I urged no more ; since, whether abstractedly

the question be right or wrong, there can be no doubt that what a man believes to be evil—to him it is evil.

“Now, Uncle Phineas, go you home with Muriel. Tell my wife what has occurred—say, I will come to tea as soon as I can. But I may have some little trouble with my people here. She must not alarm herself.”

No, the mother never did. She wasted no time in puerile apprehensions—it was not her nature; she had the rare feminine virtue of never “fidgetting”—at least externally. What was to be borne—she bore: what was to be done—she did; but she rarely made any “fuss” about either her doings or her sufferings.

To-night, she heard all my explanation; understood it, I think, more clearly than I did—probably from being better acquainted with her husband’s plans and fears. She saw at once the position in which he was placed; ag grave one, to judge by her countenance.

“Then you think John is right?”

“Of course I do.”

I had not meant it as a question, or even a doubt. But it was pleasant to hear her thus answer. For, as I have said, Ursula was not a

woman to be led blindfold, even by her husband. Sometimes they differed on minor points, and talked their differences lovingly out; but on any great question she had always this safe trust in him—that if one were right and the other wrong, the erring one was much more likely to be herself than John.

She said no more; but put the children to bed; then came down stairs with her bonnet on.

“Will you come with me, Phineas? Or are you too tired? I am going down to the mill.”

She started, walking quickly—yet not so quick but that on the slope of the common she stopped to pick up a crying child, and send it home to its mother in Enderley village.

It was almost dark, and we met no one else except a young man, whom I had occasionally seen about of evenings. He was rather odd-looking, being invariably muffled up in a large cloak and a foreign sort of hat.

“Who is that, watching our mills?” said Mrs. Halifax, hastily.

I told her all I had seen of the person.

“A Papist, most likely—I mean a Catholic.” (John objected to the opprobrious word “Papist.”) “Mrs. Tod says there are a good many hidden hereabouts. They used to find shelter at Luxmore.”

And that name set both our thoughts anxiously wandering ; so that not until we reached the foot of the hill did I notice that the person had followed us almost to the mill-gates.

In his empty mill, standing beside one of its silenced looms, we found the master. He was very much dejected—Ursula touched his arm before he even saw her.

“ Well, love—you know what has happened ? ”

“ Yes, John. But never mind. ”

“ I would not—except for my poor people. ”

“ What do you intend doing ? That which you have wished to do all the year ? ”

“ Our wishes come as a cross to us sometimes,” he said rather bitterly. “ It is the only thing I can do. The water-power being so greatly lessened, I must either stop the mills, or work them by steam. ”

“ Do that, then. Set up your steam-engine. ”

“ And have all the country down upon me for destroying hand-labour ? Have a new set of Luddites coming to burn my mill, and break my machinery ? That is what Lord Luxmore wants. Did he not say he would ruin me ?—Worse than this,—he is ruining my good name. If you had heard those poor people whom I sent away to-night ! What must they, who will have short work these two months, and

after that machinery-work, which they fancy is taking the very bread out of their mouths—what must they think of the master?”

He spoke—as we rarely heard John speak : as worldly cares and worldly injustice cause even the best of men to speak sometimes.

“Poor people !” he added, “how can I blame them ? I was actually dumb before them to-night, when they said I must take the cost of what I do,—they must have bread for their children. But so must I for mine. Lord Luxmore is the cause of all.”

Here I heard—or fancied I heard—out of the black shadow behind the loom, a heavy sigh. John and Ursula were too anxious to notice it.

“Could not anything be done ?” she asked. “Just to keep things going till your steam-engine is ready ? Will it cost much ?”

“More than I like to think of. But it must be ;—nothing venture—nothing have. You and the children are secure anyhow, that’s one comfort. But oh, my poor people at Enderley !”

Again Ursula asked if nothing could be done ?

“Yes—I did think of one plan—but—”

“John, I know what you thought of.”

She laid her hand on his arm, and looked straight up at him—eye to eye. Often, it seemed

that from long habit they could read one another's minds in this way, clearly as a book. At last John said—

“Would it be too hard a sacrifice, love-?”

“How can you talk so! We could do it easily, by living in a plainer way; by giving up one or two trifles. Only outside things, you know. Why need we care for outside things?”

“Why, indeed?” he said, in a low, fond tone.

So I easily found out how they meant to settle the difficulty; namely, by setting aside a portion of the annual income which John, in his almost morbid anxiety lest his family should take harm by any possible non-success in his business, had settled upon his wife. Three months of little renunciations—three months of the old narrow way of living, as at Norton Bury—and the poor people at Enderley might have full wages, whether or no there was full work. Then in our quiet valley there would be no want, no murmurings, and above all, no blaming of the master.

They decided it all—in fewer words than I have taken to write it—it was so easy to decide when both were of one mind.

"Now," said John, rising, as if a load were taken off his breast. "Now, do what he will, Lord Luxmore cannot do me any harm."

"Husband, don't let us speak of Lord Luxmore."

Again that sigh—quite ghostly in the darkness. They heard it likewise, this time.

"Who's there?"

"Only I. Mr. Halifax—don't be angry with me."

It was the softest, mildest voice—the voice of one long used to oppression; and the young man whom Ursula had supposed to be a Catholic appeared from behind the loom.

"I do not know you, sir. How came you to enter my mill?"

"I followed Mrs. Halifax. I have often watched her and your children. But you don't remember me."

Yes; when he came underneath the light of the one tallow candle, we all recognized the face—more wan and wasted than ever—with a sadder and more hopeless look in the large gray eyes.

"I am surprised to see you here, Lord Ravenel."

"Hush! I hate the very sound of the name."

I would have renounced it long ago. I would have hid myself away from him and from the world, if he would have let me."

"He—do you mean your father?"

The boy—no, he was a young man now, but scarcely looked more than a boy—assented silently, as if afraid to utter the name.

"Would not your coming here displease him?" said John, always tenacious of trenching a hair's breadth upon any lawful authority.

"It matters not—he is away. He has left me these six months alone at Luxmore."

"Have you offended him?" asked Ursula, who had cast kindly looks on the wan face, which perhaps reminded her of another—now for ever banished from our sight, and his also.

"He hates me because I am a Catholic, and wish to become a monk."

The youth crossed himself, then started and looked round, in terror of observers. "You will not betray me? You are a good man, Mr. Halifax, and you spoke warmly for us. Tell me—I will keep your secret—are you a Catholic too?"

"No, indeed."

“Ah! I hoped you were.—But you are sure you will not betray me?”

Mr. Halifax smiled at such a possibility. Yet in truth there was some reason for the young man's fears; since, even in those days, Catholics were hunted down both by law and by public opinion, as virulently as Protestant non-conformists. All who kept out of the pale of the national church were denounced as schismatics, deists, atheists—it was all one.

“But why do you wish to leave the world?”

“I am sick of it. There never was but one in it I cared for, or who cared for me—and now—*Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis.*”

His lips moved in a paroxysm of prayer—helpless, parrot-learnt, Latin prayer; yet being in earnest, it seemed to do him good. The mother, as if she heard in fancy that pitiful cry, which rose to my memory too—“Poor William!—don't tell William!”—turned and spoke to him kindly, asking him if he would go home with us.

He looked exceedingly surprised. “I—you cannot mean it? After Lord Luxmore has done you all this evil?”

“Is that any reason why I should not do good to his son—that is, if I could—Can I?”

The lad lifted up those soft gray eyes, and then I remembered what his sister had said of Lord Ravenel's enthusiastic admiration of Mr. Halifax. "Oh, you could—you could."

"But I and mine are heretics, you know?"

"I will pray for you. Only let me come and see you—you and your children."

"Come, and welcome."

"Heartily welcome, Lord——"

"No—not that name, Mrs. Halifax? Call me as they used to call me at St. Omer—Brother Anselmo."

The mother was half inclined to smile; but John never smiled at any one's religious beliefs, howsoever foolish. He held in universal sacredness that one rare thing—sincerity.

So henceforward "Brother Anselmo" was almost domesticated at Rose Cottage. What would the earl have said, had a little bird flown over to London and told him that his only son, the heir-apparent to his title and political opinions, was in constant and open association—for clandestine acquaintance was against all our laws and rules—with John Halifax the mill-owner, John Halifax the radical, as he was still called sometimes—imbibing principles, modes of life and of thought, which, to say the least, were

decidedly different from those of the house of Luxmore ?

Above all, what would that noble parent have said, had he been aware that this, his only son, for whom, report whispered, he was already planning a splendid marriage—as grand in a financial point of view as that he planned for his only daughter—that Lord Ravenel was spending all the love of his loving nature in the half-paternal, half lover-like sentiment which a young man will sometimes lavish on a mere child—upon John Halifax's little blind daughter, Muriel ?

He said, "She made him good"—our child of peace. He would sit gazing on her almost as if she were his guardian angel—his patron saint. And the little maid in her quiet way was very fond of him ; delighting in his company when her father was not by. But no one ever was to her like her father.

The chief bond between her and Lord Ravenel—or "Anselmo," as he would have us all call him—was music. He taught her to play on the organ, in the empty church close by. There, during the long midsummer evenings, they two would sit for hours in the organ-gallery, while I listened down below ; hardly be-

lieving that such heavenly sounds could come from those small child-fingers ; almost ready to fancy she had called down some celestial harmonist to aid her in her playing. Since, as we used to say—but by some instinct never said now—Muriel was so fond of “ talking with the angels.”

Just at this time, her father saw somewhat less of her than usual. He was oppressed with business cares ; daily, hourly vexations. Only twice a week the great water-wheel, the delight of our little Edwin as it had once been of his father, might be seen slowly turning ; and the water-courses along the meadows, with their mechanically-forced channels, and their pretty sham cataracts, were almost always low or dry. It ceased to be a pleasure to walk in the green hollow, between the two grassy hills, which heretofore Muriel and I had liked even better than the Flat. Now she missed the noise of the water—the cry of the water-hens—the stirring of the reeds. Above all, she missed her father, who was too busy to come out of his mill to us, and hardly ever had a spare minute, even for his little daughter.

He was setting up that wonderful novelty—a steam-engine. He had already been to Man-

chester and elsewhere, and seen how the new power was applied by Arkwright, Hargreaves, and others ; his own ingenuity and mechanical knowledge furnished the rest. He worked early and late—often with his own hands—aided by the men he brought with him from Manchester. For it was necessary to keep the secret—especially in our primitive valley—until the thing was complete. So the ignorant, simple mill-people, when they came for their easy Saturday's wages, only stood and gaped at the mass of iron, and the curiously-shaped brickwork, and wondered what on earth "the master" was about? But he was so thoroughly "the master," with all his kindness, that no one ventured either to question or interfere.

CHAPTER XII.

SUMMER waned. Already the beechwood began to turn red, and the little yellow autumn flowers to sow themselves all over the common, while in the midst of them looked up the large purple eye of the ground-thistle. The mornings grew hazy and dewy. We ceased to take Muriel out with us in our slow walk along John's favourite "terrace" before any one else was stirring. Her father at first missed her sorely, but always kept repeating that "early walks were not good for children." At last he gave up the walk altogether, and used to sit with her on his knee in front of the cottage till breakfast-time.

After that, saying with a kind of jealousy "that every one of us had more of his little daughter than he,"—he got into a habit of fetching her down to the mill every day at noon, and carrying her about in his arms, wherever he went, during the rest of his work.

Many a time I have seen the rough, coarse, blue-handed, blue-pinafores women of the mill stop and look wistfully after "master and little blind miss." I often think that the quiet way in which the Enderley mill-people took the introduction of machinery, and the peaceableness with which they watched for weeks the setting up of the steam-engine, was partly owing to their strong impression of Mr. Halifax's goodness as a father, and the vague, almost superstitious interest which attached to the pale, sweet face of Muriel.

Enderley was growing dreary, and we began to anticipate the cosy fireside of Longfield.

"The children will all go home looking better than they came; do you not think so, Uncle Phineas?—Especially Muriel?"

To that sentence I had to answer with a vague assent; after which I was fain to rise and walk away, thinking how blind love was—all love save mine, which had a gift for seeing the saddest side of things.

When I came back, I found the mother and daughter talking mysteriously apart. I guessed what it was about, for I had overheard Ursula saying they had better tell the child—it would be

“something for her to look forward to—something to amuse her next winter.”

“It is a great secret, mind,” the mother whispered, after its communication.

“Oh, yes!” The tiny face, smaller than ever, I thought, flushed brightly. “But I would much rather have a little sister, if you please. Only”—and the child suddenly grew earnest—“will she be like me?”

“Possibly; sisters often are alike.”

“No, I don’t mean that; but—you know?” And Muriel touched her own eyes.

“I cannot tell, my daughter. In all things else, pray God she may be like you, Muriel my darling—my child of peace!” said Ursula, embracing her with tears.

After this confidence, of which Muriel was very proud, and only condescended upon gaining express permission, to re-confide it to me, she talked incessantly of the sister that was coming, until “little Maud”—the name she chose for her—became an absolute entity in the household.

The dignity and glory of being sole depository of this momentous fact, seemed for a time to put new life—bright human life—into

this little maid of eleven years old. She grew quite womanly, as it were ; tried to help her mother in a thousand little ways, and especially by her own solitary branch of feminine industry — poor darling ! — She set on a pair of the daintiest elfin socks that ever were knitted. I found them, years after—one finished, one with the needles (all rusty) stuck through the fine worste dball, just as the child had laid it out of her hand—Ah Muriel, Muriel !

The father took great delight in this change, in her resuming her simple work, and going about constantly with her mother.

“What a comfort she will be to Ursula one day—an eldest daughter always is. So will she ; will she not, Uncle Phineas ?”

I smiled assentingly. Alas, his burthens were heavy enough ! I think I did right to smile.

“We must take her down with us to see the steam-engine first worked. I wish Ursula would have gone home without waiting for to-morrow. But there is no fear—my men are so quiet and good-humoured. What in most mills has been a day of outrage and dread, is with us quite a festival. Boys, shall you like to come ? Edwin, my practical lad, my lad that is to carry on the mills—will you promise to hold fast by Uncle

Phineas, if I let you see the steam-engine work?"

Edwin lifted up from his slate bright, penetrating eyes. He was quite an old man in his ways—wise even from his baby-hood, and quiet even when Guy snubbed him; but, I noticed, he did not come to "kiss and make friends" so soon as Guy. And though Guy was much the naughtiest, we all loved him best. Poor Guy! he had the frankest, warmest, tenderest boy-heart, always struggling to be good, and never able to accomplish it.

"Father," Guy cried, "I want to see the steam-engine move; but I'll not be a baby like Edwin; I won't hold Uncle Phineas' hand."

Hereupon ensued one of those summer storms which sometimes swept across the family horizon, in the midst of which Muriel and I stole out into the empty church, where, almost in the dark—which was no dark to her—for a long hour she sat and played. By and by the moon looked in, showing the great gilt pipes of the organ, and the little fairy figure sitting below.

Once or twice she stooped from the organ-loft to ask me where was Brother Anselmo, who usually met us in the church of evenings, and

whom to-night—this last night before the general household moved back to Longfield—we had fully expected.

At last he came, sat down by me, and listened. She was playing a fragment from one of his Catholic masses. When it ended, he called “Muriel!”

Her soft, glad answer came down from the gallery.

“Child, play the ‘Miserere’ I taught you.”

She obeyed, making the organ wail like a tormented soul. Truly, no tales I ever heard of young Wesley and the infant Mozart ever surpassed the wonderful playing of our blind child.

“Now, the ‘Dies Iræ.’—It will come,” he muttered, “to us all.”

The child struck a few notes, heavy and dolorous, filling the church like a thunder-cloud, then suddenly left off, and opening the flute-stop, burst into altogether different music.

“That is Handel—‘I know that my Redeemer liveth.’”

Exquisitely she played it, the clear treble notes seeming to utter like a human voice, the very words:

“I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.”

"And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."

With that, she ceased.

"More, more!" we both cried.

"Not now—no more now."

And we heard her shutting up the stops and closing the organ-lid.

"But my little Muriel has not finished her tune?"

"She will, some day," said the child.

So she came down from the organ-loft, feeling her way, along the aisles; and we all went out together, locking the church-door.

Lord Ravenel was rather sad that night: he was going away from Luxmore for some time. We guessed why—because the earl was coming. Bidding us good-bye, he said, mournfully, to his little pet: "I wish I were not leaving you. Will you remember me, Muriel?"

"Stoop down; I want to see you."

This was her phrase for a way she had of passing her extremely sensitive fingers over the faces of those she liked. After which, she always said she "saw" them.

"Yes; I shall remember you."

"And love me?"

“And love you, Brother Anselmo.”

He kissed, not her cheek or mouth, but her little child-hands, reverently, as if she had been the saint he worshipped, or, perhaps, the woman whom afterwards he would learn to adore. Then he went away.

“Truly,” said the mother, in an amused aside to me, as with a kind of motherly pride she watched him walk hastily down between those chestnut-trees, known of old — “truly, time flies fast. Things begin to look serious—eh, father? Five years hence we shall have that young man falling in love with Muriel.”

But John and I looked at the still soft face, half a child’s and half an angel’s.

“Hush!” he said, as if Ursula’s fancy were profanity; then eagerly snatched it up and laughed, confessing how angry he should be if anybody dared to “fall in love” with Muriel.

Next day was the one fixed for the trial of the new steam-engine; which trial being successful, we were to start at once in a post-chaise for Longfield; for the mother longed to be at home, and so did we all.

There was rather a dolorous good-bye, and much lamenting from good Mrs. Tod, who, her own bairns being grown up, thought there were

no children worthy to compare with our children. And truly, as the three boys scampered down the road—their few regrets soon over, eager for anything new—three finer lads could not be seen in the whole county.

Mrs. Halifax looked after them proudly—mother-like, she gloried in her sons; while John, walking slowly, and assuring Mrs. Tod over and over again that we should all come back next summer, went down the steep hill, carrying, hidden under many wraps and nestled close to his warm shoulder, his little frail winter-rose—his only daughter.

In front of the mill we found a considerable crowd; for, the time being ripe, Mr. Halifax had made public the fact that he meant to work his looms by steam, the only way in which he could carry on the mill at all. The announcement had been received with great surprise and remarkable quietness, both by his own work-people and all along Enderley valley. Still, there was the usual amount of contemptuous scepticism, incident on any new experiment. Men were peering about the locked door of the engine-room with a surly curiosity; and one village oracle, to prove how impossible it was that such a thing as steam could work any-

thing, had taken the trouble to light a fire in the yard and set thereon his wife's best tea-kettle, which, as she snatched angrily away, scalded him slightly, and caused him to limp away swearing, a painful illustration of the adage, that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

"Make way, my good people," said Mr. Halifax; and he crossed the mill-yard, his wife on his arm, followed by an involuntary murmur of respect.

"He be a fine fellow, the master; he sticks at nothing," was the comment heard made upon him by one of his people, and probably it expressed the feeling of the rest. There are few things which give a man more power over his fellows than the thoroughly English quality of daring.

Perhaps this was the secret why John had as yet passed safely through the crisis which had been the destruction of so many mill-owners, namely, the introduction of a power which the mill-people were convinced would ruin hand-labour. Or else the folk in our valley, out of their very primitiveness, had more faith in the master; for certainly, as John passed through the small crowd, there was only one present who raised the old fatal cry of "Down with machinery!"

“Who said that?”

At the master's voice—at the flash of the master's eye—the little knot of work-people drew back, and the malcontent, whoever he was, shrunk into silence.

Mr. Halifax walked past them, entered his mill, and unlocked the door of the room which he had turned into an engine-room, and where, along with the two men he had brought from Manchester, he had been busy almost night and day for this week past, in setting up his machinery. They worked—as the Manchester fellows said they had often been obliged to work—under lock and key.

“Your folk be queer 'uns, Mr. Halifax. They say there's six devils inside on her, theer.”

And the man pointed to the great boiler which had been built up in an outhouse adjoining.

“Six devils, say they?—Well, I'll be Maister Michael Scot—eh, Phineas?—and make my devils work hard.”

He laughed, but he was much excited. He went over, piece by piece, the complicated but delicate machinery; rubbed here and there at the brass-work which shone as bright as a mirror; then stepped back, and eyed it with pride, almost with affection.

“Isn’t it a pretty thing?—If only I have set it up right—if it will but work.”

His hands shook—his cheeks were burning—little Edwin came peering about at his knee, but he pushed the child hastily away; then he found some slight fault with the machinery, and while the workmen rectified it, stood watching them, breathless with anxiety. His wife came to his side.

“Don’t speak to me—don’t, Ursula. If it fails, I am ruined.”

“John!”—She just whispered his name, and the soft, firm fold of her fingers closed round his, strengthening, cheering. Her husband faintly smiled.

“Here!”—He unlocked the door and called to the people outside. “Come in, two of you fellows, and see how my devils work. Now then! Boys, keep out of the way—my little girl”—his voice softened—“my pet will not be frightened?—Now, my men—ready?”

He opened the valve.

With a strange noise, that made the two Enderley men spring back as if the six devils were really let loose upon them, the steam came rushing into the cylinder. There was a slight motion of the piston-rod.

"All's right ! it will work !"

No, it stopped.

John drew a deep breath.

It went on again, beginning to move slowly up and down, like the strong right arm of some automaton giant. Greater and lesser cog-wheels caught up the motive power, revolving slowly and majestically, and with steady, regular rotation, or whirling round so fast, you could hardly see that they stirred at all. Of a sudden, a soul had been put into that wonderful creature of man's making, that inert mass of wood and metal, mysteriously combined. The monster was alive !

Speechless, John stood watching it. Their trial over, his energies collapsed ; he sat down by his wife's side, and taking Muriel on his knee, bent his head over hers.

"Is all right, father ?" the child whispered.

"All quite right, my own."

"You said you could do it, and you have done it," cried his wife, her eyes glowing with triumph, her head erect and proud.

John dropped his lower, lower still. "Yes," he murmured ; "yes, thank God."

Then he opened the door, and let all the people in to see the wondrous sight.

They crowded in by dozens, staring about in blank wonder, gaping curiosity, ill-disguised alarm. John took pains to explain the machinery, stage by stage, till some of the more intelligent caught up the principle, and made merry at the notion of "devils." But they all looked with great awe at the master, as if he were something more than man. They listened open-mouthed to every word he uttered, cramming the small engine-room till it was scarcely possible to breathe, but keeping at a respectful distance from the iron-armed monster, that went working, working on, as if ready and able to work on to everlasting.

John took his wife and children out into the open air. Muriel, who had stood for the last few minutes by her father's side, listening with a pleased look to the monotonous regular sound, like the breathing of the demon, was unwilling to go.

"I am very glad, I was with you to-day,—very glad father," she kept saying.

He said, as often—twice as often—that next summer, when we came back to Enderley, she should be with him at the mills every day, and all day over, if she liked.

There was now nothing to be done but to

hasten as quickly and merrily as possible to our well-beloved Longfield.

Waiting for the post-chaise, Mrs. Halifax and the boys sat down on the bridge over the defunct and silenced waterfall, on the muddy steps of which, where the stream used to dash musically over, weeds and long grasses, mingled with the drooping water-fern, were already beginning to grow.

"It looks desolate, but we need not mind that now," said Mrs. Halifax.

"No," her husband answered. "Steam power once obtained, I can apply it in any way I choose. My people will not hinder; they trust me—they like me."

"And perhaps, are just a little afraid of you. No matter—it is a wholesome fear. I should not like to have married a man whom nobody was afraid of."

John smiled; he was looking at a horseman riding towards us along the high road. "I do believe, that is Lord Luxmore. I wonder whether he has heard of my steam-engine. Love will you go back into the mill or not?"

"Certainly not." The mother seated herself on the bridge with her boys around her. John

avouched, with an air like the mother of the Gracchi, or like the Highland woman who trained one son after another to fight and slay their enemy—their father's murderer.

“Don't jest,” said Ursula. She was much more excited than her husband. Two angry spots burnt on her cheeks when Lord Luxmore came up, and in passing, bowed.

Mrs. Halifax returned it, haughtily enough. But at the moment a loud cheer broke out from the mill hard by, and “Hurrah for the master!” “Hurrah for Mr. Halifax!” was distinctly heard. The mother smiled, right proudly.

Lord Luxmore turned to his tenant—they might have been on the best terms imaginable from his bland air.

“What is that rather harsh noise I hear, Mr. Halifax?”

“It is my men cheering me.”

“Oh, how charming! so grateful to the feelings. And *why* do they cheer you, may I ask?”

John briefly told him, speaking with perfect courtesy, as he was addressed.

“And this steam-engine—I have heard of it before—will greatly advantage your mills?”

“It will, my lord. It renders me quite inde-

pendent of your stream, of which the fountains at Luxmore can now have the full monopoly.”

It would not have been human nature, if a spice of harmless malice—even triumph—had not sparkled in John’s eye, as he said this. He was walking by the horse’s side, as Lord Luxmore had politely requested him.

They went a little way up the hill together, out of sight of Mrs. Halifax, who was busy putting the two younger boys into the chaise.

“I did not quite understand. Would you do me the favour to repeat your sentence?”

“Merely, my lord, that your cutting off of the water-course has been to me one of the greatest advantages I ever had in my life; for which, whether meant or not, allow me to thank you.”

The earl looked full in John’s face, without answering; then spurred his horse violently. The animal started off, full speed.

“The children. Good God—the children!”

Guy was in the ditch-bank, gathering flowers—but Muriel—For the first time in our lives, we had forgotten Muriel.

She stood in the horse’s path—the helpless, blind child. The next instant, she was knocked down.

I never heard a curse on John Halifax’s lips

but once—that once. Lord Luxmore heard it too. The image of the frantic father, snatching up his darling from under the horse's heels, must have haunted the earl's good memory for many a day.

He dismounted, saying anxiously, "I hope the little girl is not injured? It was accident—you see—pure accident."

But John did not hear; he would scarcely have heard heaven's thunder. He knelt with the child in his arms by a little runnel in the ditch-bank. When the water touched her, she opened her eyes with that wide, momentary stare so painful to behold.

"My little darling!"

Muriel smiled, and nestled to him. "Indeed, I am not hurt, dear father."

Lord Luxmore, standing by, seemed much relieved, and again pressed his apologies.

No answer.

"Go away," sobbed out Guy, shaking both his fists in the nobleman's face. "Go away—or I'll kill you—wicked man! I would have done it, if you had killed my sister."

Lord Luxmore laughed at the boy's fury—threw him a guinea, which Guy threw back at him with all his might, and rode placidly away.

“Guy—Guy—” called the faint, soft voice which had more power over him than any other, except his mother’s. “Guy must not be angry. Father, don’t let him be angry.”

But the father was wholly occupied in Muriel—looking in her face, and feeling all her little fragile limbs, to make sure that in no way she was injured.

It appeared not; though the escape seemed almost miraculous. John recurred, with a kind of trembling tenacity, to the old saying in our house, that “nothing ever harmed Muriel.”

“Since it is safe over, and she can walk—you are sure you can, my pet?—I think we will not say anything about this to the mother; at least, not till we reach Longfield.”

But it was too late. There was no deceiving the mother. Every change in every little face struck her instantaneously. The minute we re-joined her, she said—

“John, something has happened to Muriel.”

Then he told her, making as light of the accident as he could; as, indeed, for the first ten minutes we all believed, until alarmed by the extreme pallor and silence of the child.

Mrs. Halifax sat down by the roadside, bathed

Muriel's forehead, and smoothed her hair ; but still the little curls lay motionless against the mother's breast,—and still to every question, she only answered “that she was not hurt.”

All this while the post-chaise was waiting.

“What must be done?” I enquired of Ursula ; for it was no use asking John anything.

“We must go back again to Enderley,” she said decidedly.

So, giving Muriel into her father's arms, she led the way ; and, a melancholy procession, we again ascended the hill to Rose Cottage door.

CHAPTER XIII.

WITHOUT any discussion, our plans were tacitly changed—no more was said about going home to dear Longfield. Every one felt, though no one trusted it to words, that the journey was impossible. For Muriel lay, day after day, on her little bed in an upper chamber, or was carried softly down in the middle of the day by her father, never complaining, but never attempting to move or talk. When we asked her if she felt ill, she always answered, “Oh no! only so very tired.” Nothing more.

“She is dull, for want of the others to play with her. The boys should not run out and leave their sister alone,” said John, almost sharply, when one bright morning the lads’ merry voices came down from the Flat, while he and I were sitting by Muriel’s sofa in the still parlour.

“ Father, let the boys play without me, please. Indeed I do not mind. I had rather lie quiet here.”

“ But it is not good for my little girl always to be quiet, and it grieves father.”

“ Does it ? ” She roused herself, sat upright, and began to move her limbs, but wearily.

“ That is right, my darling. Now let me see how well you can walk.”

Muriel slipped to her feet and tried to cross the room, catching at table and chairs,—now, alas ! not only for guidance but actual support. At last she began to stagger, and said, half crying,—

“ I can’t walk, I am so tired. Oh, do take me in your arms, dear father.”

Her father took her, looked long in her sightless face, then buried his against her shoulder, saying nothing. But I think in that moment he too saw, glittering and bare, the long-veiled Hand which, for this year past, *I* had seen stretched out of the immutable heavens, claiming that which was Its own. Ever after, there was discernible in John’s countenance a something which all the cares of his anxious yet happy life had never written there—an ineffaceable record, burnt in with fire.

He held her in his arms all day. He invented all sorts of tales and little amusements for her ; and when she was tired of these, he let her lie in his bosom and sleep. After her bed-time, he asked me to go out with him on the Flat.

It was a misty night. The very cows and asses stood up large and spectral as shadows. There was not a single star to be seen.

We took our walk along the terrace and came back again, without exchanging a single word. Then John said hastily—

“ I am glad her mother was so busy to-day—too busy to notice.”

“ Yes,” I answered ; unconnected as his words were.

“ Do you understand me, Phineas ? Her mother must not on any account be led to imagine, or to fear—anything. You must not look as you looked this morning. You must not, Phineas.”

He spoke almost angrily. I answered in a few quieting words. We were silent, until over the common we caught sight of the light in Muriel’s window. Then I felt rather than heard the father’s groan.

“ Oh, God ! my only daughter—my dearest child !”

Yes, she was the dearest. I knew it. Strange mystery, that He should so often take, by death or otherwise, the *dearest*—always the dearest. Strange, that He should hear us cry—us writhing in the dust, “O! Father, anything, anything but this?” But our Father answers not; and meanwhile the desire of our eyes, be it a life, a love, or a blessing—slowly, slowly goes—is gone. And yet we have to believe in our Father. Perhaps of all trials to human faith this is the sorest. Thanks be to God if He puts into our hearts such love towards Him, that even while He slays us we can trust Him still.

This father—this broken-hearted earthly father, could.

When we sat at the supper-table, Ursula, John, and I, the children being all in bed, no one could have told that there was any shadow over us, more than the sadly-familiar pain of the darling of the house being “not so strong as she used to be.”

“But I think she will be, John. We shall have her quite about again, before—”

The mother stopped, slightly smiling. It was, indeed, an especial mercy of heaven which put that unaccountable blindness before her eyes,

and gave her other duties and other cares to intercept the thought of Muriel. While from morning till night it was the incessant secret care of her husband, myself, and good Mrs. Tod, to keep her out of her little daughter's sight, and prevent her mind from catching the danger of one single fear.

Thus, within a week or two, the mother lay down cheerfully upon her couch of pain, and gave another child to the household—a little sister to Muriel.

Muriel was the first to whom the news was told. Her father told it. His natural joy and thankfulness seemed for the moment to efface every other thought.

“She is come, darling ! little Maud is come. I am very rich—for I have two daughters now.”

“Muriel is glad, father.” But she showed her gladness in a strangely quiet, meditative way, unlike a child—unlike even her old self.

“What are you thinking of, my pet ?”

“That—though father has another daughter, I hope he will remember the first one, sometimes.”

“She is jealous !” cried John, in the curious delight with which he always detected in her any weakness, any fault, which brought her down

to the safe level of humanity. "See, Uncle Phineas, our Muriel is actually jealous."

But Muriel only smiled.

That smile—so serene, so apart from every feeling or passion appertaining to us who are "of the earth, earthy," smote the father to the heart's core.

He sat down by her, and she crept up into his arms.

"What day is it, father?"

"The first of December."

"I am glad. Little Maud's birthday will be in the same month as mine."

"But you came in the snow, Muriel, and now it is warm and mild."

"There will be snow on my birthday, though. There always is. The snow is fond of me, father. It would like me to lie down and be all covered over, so that you could not find me anywhere."

I heard John try to echo her weak, soft laugh.

"This month it will be eleven years since I was born, will it not, father?"

"Yes, my darling."

"What a long time! Then, when my little sister is as old as I am, I shall be—that is,

I should have been—a woman grown. Fancy me twenty years old, as tall as mother, wearing a gown like her, talking and ordering, and busy about the house. How funny!” And she laughed again. “Oh! no, father, I couldn’t do it. I had better remain always your little Muriel, weak and small, who liked to creep close to you, and go to sleep in this way.”

She ceased talking—very soon she was sound asleep. But—the father!

Muriel faded, though slowly. Sometimes she was so well for an hour or two, that the Hand seemed drawn back into the clouds, till of a sudden, again we discerned it there.

One Sunday—it was ten days or so after Maud’s birth, and the weather had been so bitterly cold that the mother had herself forbidden our bringing Muriel to the other side of the house where she and the baby lay—Mrs. Tod was laying the dinner, and John stood at the window playing with his three boys.

He turned abruptly, and saw all the chairs placed round the table—all save one.

“Where is Muriel’s chair, Mrs. Tod?”

“Sir, she says she feels so tired like, she’d rather not come down to-day,” answered Mrs. Tod, hesitatingly.

“Not come down?”

“Maybe better not, Mr. Halifax. Look out at the snow. It’ll be warmer for the dear child to-morrow.”

“You are right. Yes, I had forgotten the snow. She shall come down to-morrow.”

I caught Mrs. Tod’s eyes; they were running over. She was too wise to speak of it—but she knew the truth as well as we.

This Sunday—I remember it well—was the first day we sat down to dinner with the one place vacant.

For a few days longer, her father, every evening when he came in from the mills, persisted in carrying her down, as he had said, holding her on his knee during tea, then amusing her and letting the boys amuse her for half-an-hour or so before bed-time. But at the week’s end even this ceased.

When Mrs. Halifax, quite convalescent, was brought triumphantly to her old place at our happy Sunday dinner-table, and all the boys came pressing about her, vying which should get most kisses from little sister Maud,—she looked round, surprised amidst her smiling, and asked,

“Where is Muriel?”

“She seems to feel this bitter weather a good

deal," John said. "And I thought it better she should not come down to dinner."

"No," added Guy, wondering and dolefully, "sister has not been down to dinner with us for a great many days."

The mother started; looked first at her husband, and then at me.

"Why did nobody tell me this?"

"Love—there was nothing to be told."

"Has the child had any illness that I do not know of?"

"No."

"Has Dr. Jessop seen her?"

"Several times."

"Mother," said Guy, eager to comfort, for naughty as he was sometimes, he was the most tenderhearted of all the boys, especially to Muriel and to his mother—"sister isn't ill a bit, I know. She was laughing and talking with me just now—saying she knows she could carry baby a great deal better than I could. She is as merry as ever she can be."

The mother kissed him in her quick eager way—the sole indication of that maternal love which was in her almost a passion. She looked more satisfied.

Nevertheless, when Mrs. Tod came into the

parlour, she rose and put little Maud into her arms.

“Take baby, please, while I go up to see Muriel.”

“Don’t — now don’t, please, Mrs. Halifax,” cried earnestly the good woman,

Ursula turned very pale. “They ought to have told me,” she muttered; “John, *you must* let me go and see my child.”

“Presently—presently—Guy, run up and play with Muriel. Phineas, take the others with you. You shall go up-stairs in one minute, my darling wife!”

He turned us all out of the room, and shut the door. How he told her that which it was necessary she should know — that which Dr. Jessop himself had told us this very morning — how the father and mother bore this first open revelation of their unutterable grief—for ever remained unknown.

I was sitting by Muriel’s bed, when they came up-stairs. The darling lay, listening to her brother, who was squatted on her pillow, making all sorts of funny talk. There was a smile on her face; she looked quite rosy: I hoped Ursula might not notice, just for the time being, the great change the last few weeks had made.

But she did—who could ever blindfold a mother? For a moment I saw her recoil—then turn to her husband with a dumb, piteous, desperate look, as though to say, “Help me—my sorrow is more than I can bear!”

But Muriel, hearing the step, cried with a joyful cry, “Mother! it’s my mother!”

The mother folded her to her breast.

Muriel shed a tear or two there—in a satisfied, peaceful way; the mother did not weep at all. Her self-command, so far as speech went, was miraculous. For her look—but then she knew the child was blind.

“Now,” she said, “my pet will be good, and not cry? It would do her harm. We must be very happy to-day.”

“Oh yes.” Then in a fond whisper, “Please, I do so want to see little Maud?”

“Who?” with an absent gaze.

“My little sister Maud—Maud that is to take my place and be everybody’s darling now.”

“Hush, Muriel,” said the father hoarsely.

A strangely soft smile broke over her face—and she was silent.

The new baby was carried up-stairs proudly by Mrs. Tod, all the boys following. Quite a levée

was held round the bed, where, laid close beside her, her weak hands being guided over the tiny face and form, Muriel first "saw" her little sister. She was greatly pleased. With a grave elder-sisterly air she felt all over the baby-limbs, and when Maud set up an indignant cry, began hushing her with so quaint an imitation of motherliness that we all were amused.

"You'll be a capital nurse in a month or two, my pretty!" said Mrs. Tod.

Muriel only smiled. "How fat she is;—and look, how fast her fingers take hold. And her head is so round, and her hair feels so soft—as soft as my doves' necks at Longfield. What colour is it? Like mine?"

It was; nearly the same shade. Maud bore, the mother declared, the strongest likeness to Muriel.

"I am so glad. But these?" touching her eyes anxiously.

"No—my darling. Not like you there," was the low answer.

"I am *very* glad. Please, little Maud, don't cry—it's only sister. How wide open your eyes feel! I wonder,"—with a thoughtful pause—"I wonder if you can see me. Little Maud, I should like you to see your sister."

“She does see, of course; how she stares!” cried Guy. And then Edwin began to argue to the contrary, protesting that as kittens and puppies could not see at first, he believed little babies did not: which produced a warm altercation among the children gathered round the bed, while Muriel lay back quietly on her pillow, with her little sister fondly hugged to her breast.

The father and mother looked on. It was such a picture—these five darlings, these children which God had given them—a group perfect and complete in itself, like a root of daisies, or a branch of ripening fruit, which not one could be added to, or taken from—

No. I was sure, from the parents’ smile, that, this once, Mercy had blinded their eyes, so that they saw nothing beyond the present moment.

The children were wildly happy. All the afternoon they kept up their innocent little games by Muriel’s bed-side; she sometimes sharing, sometimes listening apart. Only once or twice came that wistful, absent look, as if she were listening partly to us, and partly to those we heard not; as if through the wide open orbs the soul were straining at sights wonderful and new—sights unto which *her* eyes were the clear-seeing, and ours the blank and blind.

It seems strange now, to remember that Sunday afternoon, and how merry we all were ; how we drank tea in the queer bedroom at the top of the house ; and how afterwards Muriel went to sleep in the twilight, with baby Maud in her arms. Mrs. Halifax sat beside the little bed, a sudden blazing up of the fire showing the intentness of her watch over these two, her eldest and youngest, fast asleep ; their breathing so soft, one hardly knew which was frailest, the life slowly fading or the life but just begun. The breaths seemed to mix and mingle, and the two faces, lying close together, to grow into a strange likeness each to each. At least we all fancied so.

Meanwhile, John kept his boys as still as mice, in the broad window-seat, looking across the white snowy sheet, with black bushes peering out here and there ; to the feathery beechwood, over the tops of which the new moon was going down. Such a little young moon ! and how peacefully—nay smilingly—she set among the snows !

The children watched her till the very last minute, when Guy startled the deep quiet of the room by exclaiming—"There—she's gone."

"Hush !"

No, mother, I am awake," said Muriel.
"Who is gone, Guy?"

"The moon—such a pretty little moon."

"Ah, Maud will see the moon some day."
She dropped her cheek down again beside the baby sister, and was asleep once more.

This is the only incident I remember of that peaceful, heavenly hour.

Maud broke upon its quietude by her waking and wailing; and Muriel very unwillingly let the little sister go.

"I wish she might stay with me—just this one night; and to-morrow is my birthday. Please, mother, may she stay?"

"We will both stay, my darling. I shall not leave you again."

"I am so glad, mother,"—and once more she turned round, as if to go to sleep.

"Are you tired, my pet?" said John, looking intently at her.

"No, father."

"Shall I take your brothers down-stairs?"

"Not yet, dear father."

"What would you like, then?"

"Only to lie here, this Sunday evening, among you all."

He asked her if she would like him to read aloud? as he generally did of Sunday evenings.

"Yes, please; and Guy will come and sit quiet on the bed beside me and listen. That will be pleasant. Guy was always very good to his sister—always."

"I don't know that," said Guy, in a conscience-stricken tone. "But I mean to be, when I grow a big man—that I do!"

No one answered. John opened the large Book—the Book he had taught all his children to long for and to love—and read out of it their favourite history of Joseph and his brethren. The mother sat by him at the fireside, rocking Maud softly on her knees. Edwin and Walter settled themselves on the hearth-rug, with great eyes intently fixed on their father. From behind him the candle-light fell softly down on the motionless figure in the bed, whose hand he held, and whose face he every now and then turned to look at—then, satisfied, continued to read.

In the reading his voice had a fatherly, flowing calm—as Jacob's might have had, when "the children were tender," and he gathered them all round him under the palm-trees of Succoth—years before he cried unto the Lord

that bitter cry—(which John hurried over as he read)—“*If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.*”

For an hour, nearly, we all sat thus—with the wind coming up the valley, howling in the beech-wood, and shaking the casement as it passed outside. Within, the only sound was the father's voice. This ceased at last: he shut the Bible, and put it aside. The group—that last perfect household picture—was broken up. It melted away into things of the past, and became only a picture, for evermore.

“Now, boys—it is full time to say good-night. There, go and kiss your sister.”

“Which?” said Edwin, in his funny way. “We've got two now; and I don't know which is the biggest baby.”

“I'll thrash you if you say that again,” cried Guy. “Which, indeed? Maud is but the baby. Muriel will be always ‘sister.’”

‘Sister’ faintly laughed, as she answered his fond kiss—Guy was often thought to be her favourite brother.

“Now, off with you, boys; and go down stairs quietly—mind, I say quietly.”

They obeyed—that is, as literally as boy-nature can obey such an admonition. But

an hour after, I heard Guy and Edwin arguing vociferously in the dark, on the respective merits and future treatment of their two sisters, Muriel and Maud.

John and I sat up late together that night. He could not rest—even though he told me he had left the mother and her two daughters as cosy as a nest of wood-pigeons. We listened to the wild night, till it had almost howled itself away ; then our fire went out, and we came and sat over the last faggot in Mrs. Tod's kitchen—the old Debateable Land. We began talking of that long-ago time, and not of this time at all. The vivid present—never out of either mind for an instant—we in our conversation did not touch upon, by at least ten years. Nor did we give expression to a thought which strongly oppressed me, and which I once or twice fancied I could detect in John likewise—how very like this night seemed to the night when Mr. March died—the same silentness in the house—the same windy whirl without—the same blaze of the wood-fire on the same kitchen ceiling.

More than once, I could almost have deluded myself that I heard the faint moans and footsteps over-head—that the stair case door would open, and we should see there Miss.

March, in her white gown, and her pale, stedfast look.

"I think the mother seemed very well and calm to-night," I said hesitatingly, as we were retiring.

"She is. God help her—and us all!"

"He will."

This was all we said.

He went up-stairs the last thing, and brought down word that mother and children were all sound asleep.

"I think I may leave them until daylight to-morrow. And now, Uncle Phineas, go you to bed, for you look as tired as tired can be."

I went to bed; but all night long I had disturbed dreams, in which I pictured over and over again, first the night when Mr. March died—then the night at Longfield, when the little white ghost had crossed by my bed's foot, into the room where Mary Baines' dead boy lay. And continually, towards morning, I fancied I heard through my window, which faced the church, the faint, distant sound of the organ, as when Muriel used to play it.

Long before it was light, I rose. As I passed the boys' room, Guy called out to me:

"Halloa! Uncle Phineas, is it a fine morning?"

—for I want to go down into the wood and get a lot of beech-nuts and fir-cones for sister. It's her birth-day to-day, you know."

It was, for her. But for us—Oh, Muriel, our darling—darling child !

Let me hasten over the story of that morning, for my old heart quails before it still.

John went early to the room up-stairs. It was very still. Ursula lay calmly asleep, with baby Maud in her bosom ; on her other side, with eyes wide open to the daylight, lay,—that which for more than ten years we had been used to call "blind Muriel." She saw, now.

* * * *

The same day, at evening, we three were sitting in the parlour ; we elders only—it was past the children's bed-time. Grief had spent itself dry ; we were all very quiet. Even Ursula, when she came in from fetching the boys' candle, as had always been her custom, and though afterwards I thought I had heard her going upstairs, likewise from habit,—where there was no need to bid any mother's good-night now — even Ursula sat in the rocking-chair, nursing Maud, and trying to still her crying with a little foolish baby-tune that had descended as a family lullaby from one to the other of the whole five—how sad it sounded !

John—who sat at the table, shading the light from his eyes, an open book lying before him, of which he never turned one page—looked up at her.

“Love, you must not tire yourself. Give me the child.”

“No, no ! Let me keep my baby, she comforts me so.” And the mother burst into uncontrollable weeping.

John shut his book and came to her. He supported her on his bosom, saying a soothing word or two at intervals, or, when the paroxysm of her anguish was beyond all bounds, supporting her silently till it had gone by ; never once letting her feel that, bitter as her sorrow was, his was heavier even than hers.

Thus, during the whole of the day, had he been the stay and consolation of the household. For himself—the father’s grief was altogether dumb.

At last Mrs. Halifax became more composed. She sat beside her husband, her hand in his, neither speaking, but gazing as it were into the face of this their great sorrow, and from thence up to the face of God. They felt that He could help them to bear it ; ay, or anything else

that it was His will to send—if they might thus bear it, together.

We all three sat thus, and there had not been a sound in the parlour for ever so long, when Mrs. Tod opened the door and beckoned me.

“He will come in—he’s crazy like, poor fellow! He has only just heard—”

She broke off with a sob. Lord Ravenel pushed her aside and stood at the door. We had not seen him since the day of that innocent jest about his “falling in love” with Muriel. Seeing us all so quiet, and the parlour looking as it always did when he used to come of evenings—the young man drew back amazed.

“It is not true! No, it could not be true!” he muttered.

“It is true,” said the father. “Come in.”

The mother held out her hand to him. “Yes, come in. You were very fond of—”

Ah, that name!—now nothing but a name! For a little while we all wept sore.

Then we told him—it was Ursula who did it chiefly—all particulars about our darling. She told him, but calmly, as became one on whom had fallen the utmost sorrow and crowning consecration of motherhood—that of yielding up her child, a portion of her own being, to the

corruption of the grave,—of resigning the life which out of her own life had been created, unto the Creator of all.

Surely, distinct and peculiar from every other grief, every other renunciation, must be that of a woman who is thus chosen to give her very flesh and blood, the fruit of her own womb, unto the Lord !

This dignity, this sanctity, seemed gradually to fall upon the mourning mother, as she talked about her lost one ; repeating often—“ I tell you this, because you were so fond of Muriel.”

He listened silently. At length he said, “ I want to see Muriel.”

The mother lit a candle, and he followed her up-stairs.

Just the same homely room—half bed-chamber, half-nursery—the same little curtainless bed where, for a week past, we had been accustomed to see the wasted figure and small pale face lying, in smiling quietude, all day long.

It lay there still. In it, and in the room, was hardly any change. One of Walter’s playthings was in a corner of the window-sill, and on the chest of drawers stood the nosegay of Christmas roses which Guy had brought for his sister

yesterday morning. Nay, her shawl—a white, soft, furry shawl, that she was fond of wearing—remained still hanging up behind the door. One could almost fancy the little maid had just been said “good-night” to, and left to dream childish dreams on her nursery pillow, where the small head rested so peacefully, with that pretty babyish nightcap tied over the pretty curls.

There she was, the child who had gone out of the number of our children—our earthly children—for ever.

Her mother sat down at the side of the bed, her father at its foot, looking at her. Lord Ravenel stood by, motionless; then stooping down, he kissed the small marble hand.

“Good-bye, good-bye, my little Muriel!”

And he left the room abruptly, in such an anguish of grief that the mother rose and followed him.

John went to the door and locked it, almost with a sort of impatience; then came back and stood by his darling, alone. Me he never saw—no, nor anything in the world except that little face, even in death so strangely like his own. The face which had been for eleven years the joy of his heart, the very apple of his eye.

For a long time he remained gazing, in a stupor of silence ; then, sinking on his knees, he stretched out his arms across the bed, with a bitter cry—

“ Come back to me, my darling, my first-born ! Come back to me, Muriel, my little daughter—my own little daughter ! ”

But thou wert with the angels, Muriel—
Muriel !

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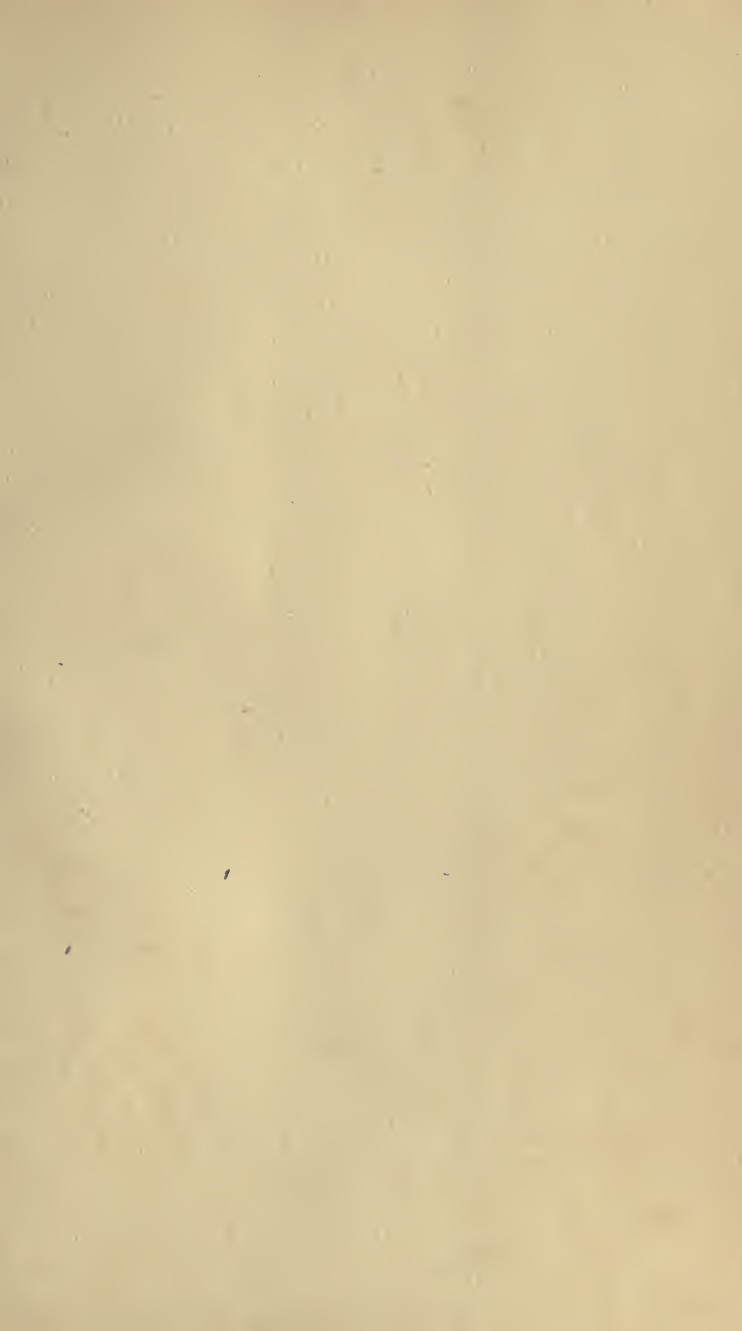
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